

Innocent Fire by Fatebegins

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Summary:

Jensen is a rich debauched Lord known for his wild parties and wilder ways. Jared is a shy country mouse. Due to a long standing agreement between their families, they are arranged to be married.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

ETA: SOMEONE HAS PLAGIARIZED MY STORY WORD FOR WORD AND IS SELLING IT ON AMAZON at ;<http://www.amazon.com/A-Rakes-Progress-alpha-omega-ebook/dp/B00IZGPLNC>. I am so pissed that stole all of my story (word for word) and they're making money off of it!!!!

This work is unbetaed, meaning there may be mistakes. If that bothers you, skip this. If it doesn't please point out any mistakes and I will fix them.

I'm a bit excited because I haven't written a new J2 in so long!! I read this prompt and my muse latched on. OP i hope this lives up to your expectations, i did take some liberties.

Jared is 17 here and Jensen is 28, i don't think that's underage (esp for the time period), so I didn't warn for it.

This was written for a prompt over at J2 prompts:

I hope you all enjoy, let me know what you think :)

thank you!

xC

1.

Jensen hisses out a surprised breath when the mouth on his cock twists in expert time with the hand palming his balls. It would seem Michael possessed more skill than he had originally thought. Judging by the smirk given at his intake of breath, and the gleam in his blue eyes, Michael is feeling rather proud, redoubling his efforts, his tongue probing at the leaking slit of Jensen's cock head.

"Damn." Jensen squeezes his eyes shut, legs spreading wide as he rises up on his

heels to thrust into Michael's hot, wet mouth. He can feel his skin tingling, muscles tightening as his orgasm nears. "I'm going to--"

"Oh for god's sake Jensen!" The door to the barn stall slams open and Jensen groans in disappointment when Michael scrambles away from him, hands flailing to hide his naked body. "I don't know how your antics still manage to surprise me after all this time."

Ignoring his father's scathing retorts, Jensen sighs, lacing his breeches back up lazily while Michael stutters his apologies and flushes as he tugs on his clothing. While his father glares, the stable hand rushes out after one more aborted bow, rumpled shirt still in hand and one boot left behind in the hay.

"You scared him off! Now what am I supposed to do all afternoon?"

"How about you return to your duties?" Alan Ackles is the picture of a long suffering father, disappointment and accusation blended into his perfect, fair aristocratic features. "I suppose I should be grateful you chose a stable hand this time."

"What do you want father?" Jensen asks, already bored.

"I would have preferred not to do this here." He looks about the barn in distaste. "Your mother and I have some exciting news, I thought you'd want to be informed immediately."

Jensen shakes hair out of his eyes, sweat drying uncomfortably on his skin. He needs to take a long bath. "What 'news' couldn't wait until after I came?"

"Don't be vulgar." His father gripes but continues, "We've arranged a match for you."

That stops Jensen in his tracks, "Match?"

"A marriage match."

"Yes, that's bloody clear, Father!" Jensen snaps, as rage builds. He's known this day would come, and soon, he's two years shy of his thirtieth, but he had thought he'd have more time. "I assumed you would arrange my match at thirty, like

yours was done.”

“Yes, well,” His father waves a hand in Jensen’s general direction, “I did not behave like you.”

“So this is a *punishment*?” Jensen’s hands curl into fists, “ Fine. Shove your simpering brat into my home, but taking a beta will not change a thing about me or my behavior.”

“Omega.”

Jensen halfway out of the barn before he hears that tidbit. “Excuse me?”

“I’ve arranged for you to be mated to an *omega*.”

“An omega, hm? That’s interesting.” There are few well born omegas, but the majority of them are commoners, bred for whore houses, wet holes made for taking cock. The idea of having an omega of his own excites him. “Is it the Lady Wilshire? Viscount Harris’ daughter?” Jensen’s dick takes interest as he remembers Lady Danneel’s burnished curls, her ample breasts. “Or perhaps Cohen? He’s a gorgeous man--”

“The boy is from Delshire.”

“*Delshire*?” Jensen wrinkles his nose in disgust. “There is nothing in Delshire save for trees.”

“And the Padaleckis; an old, respected family of farmers.”

Jensen sniffs disdainfully, “You mean *commoners*.”

“Commoners who saved your mother’s life!” There are few times Alan is truly moved to anger, and Jensen, indulged as he is, has rarely been on the receiving end. “The match is to be finalized in a fortnight; ready yourself for your intended’s arrival.”

“Is this what those wild wolves demanded in penance? A place in our society?”

“It is what they *deserve*, and honestly, i would have given much more.” His

father corrects, then softens, “I think this will be good for you, Jensen. You need to settle down, cease your dalliances, wild parties and drunken nights. That’s no way to live.”

“This will change nothing, Father; nothing. I will have my freedom.”

2.

The city overwhelms Jared, the large crowds and foreign smells so unlike the fresh air of the forest make him want to hide behind his mother’s skirts like a child. There are Weres everywhere, many staring openly at their modest carriage as they ride through the streets. It is clear the news of their arrival has preceded them.

The shops and culture, bright colors and busy streets are jarring and frightening to Jared. All he’s ever known are the peaceful green tones of the forest and calming accents of flowers. These people are brash, speak loudly and titter behind their fans. He’ll never fit in.

The people gawking are more than just strangers, they’re polished and refined. Jared is anything but, he knows that despite Chad’s well meaning assurances, he’s mousy and plain. He’s always been too tall, too skinny; all elbows and knees. His intended will take one look at him and be disappointed.

“Chin up.” Sharon tells him softly, hand squeezing his in reassurance. “You can’t be so timid, look them all straight in the eyes.”

Jared shakes his head furtively, “I couldn’t.”

“You’re their equal now,” Sharon’s cheeks flush with pride, “Or you will be.”

“I don’t care about any of that... I wish to remain at home, with you.”

“This was decided long ago,” Sharon shushes him, “Your father gave his life to elevate yours. I am forever grateful that Lord Ackles kept his promises. Not many lords would give their Alpha son to a family such as ours.”

Jared knows the tale well. On a brutal winter night some fifteen years ago, the Ackles caravan had attempted to cross the Delshire river. The waters had frozen

to a thick white, as they did every winter, however, it was far too early for the center to do the same. Midway across the ice had split, dragging the large carriage into it's icy depths. His father, nearby gathering wood, had rushed over at the screams to help, dragging not only the young lord free but his mate as well before he slipped and the heavy wheels of the wagon crushed his chest. After a few days, it became obvious that his father would never recover, his internal injuries too extensive. The Ackles, seeking to repay him, had promised a marriage match to their first born upon seeing the man's small son. Days later, his father had died but his mother always said he passed peacefully knowing Jared would be taken care of.

Midway through, an envoy stops the carriage. The footmen, all alphas, are dressed in crisp white breeches, black boots gleaming and Ackles crest emblazoned upon their cloaks. The sight makes Jared want to burst into tears and run back to the safety of his little cottage and friendly village.

"Look! Jared, your intended has sent an escort." Sharon beams, calloused hands tucking loose strands black of hair behind her ears. She's smiling widely, not affected by the stares like he is. "Tradition, this is. It's a good sign; your lord has welcomed you!"

Seeing how excited his mother is, after years of watching her labor to support both of them, makes Jared bite back his own fears of marrying a stranger. Taking a deep, stabilizing breath, Jared once again vows to make his mother happy. She deserves it.

3.

Panting, Jensen rolls his hips in a punishing rhythm, thrusting deep into the soft, willing body beneath him. As usual, Joanna doesn't seem to mind the roughness, slim legs tightening over his waist and nails scouring his back. She's a slut and he loves it. Joanna is the most enthusiastic of all his bed partners. Jensen wonders briefly if she's the same way with her husband before he pulls out of her tight body, coming over her trembling stomach in white streaks as he groans. With a groan, Jensen squeezes the swelling base of his dick, biting his lip at the intense pleasure. It's a pity he can't knot her, Jensen collapses back on the snow white pillows, breathing heavily. A knot means the possibility of a child and Jensen knows that would be the one thing his father would truly not stand for, even if Jensen is his sole remaining child.

“Mm.” Joanna purrs beside him, arching her back like a cat. “That was amazing-”

“I aim to astound.”

“And modest, too.” She combs her fingers through her tousled blonde hair, casting Jensen a calculated look. “You know, I’m quite surprised that you hosted a gathering tonight. All anyone can speak of is the arrival of your intended.”

Jensen shuts his eyes, “There is not enough interesting gossip in this city.”

“It is fascinating though, a commoner? And from the countryside.” Her tone sours, “I only thought trees were in Delshire.” A malicious giggle, “Although, he does resemble one.”

That gets Jensen’s attention. “You’ve seen him?”

“Oh, I have.” Joanna laughs, “You poor thing! The boy is *hopeless*.”

“Ugly, then?”

She nods. “Skinny and unkept, and hair longer than any man of the city would wear. Your father did you a grave disservice.”

Jensen grunts, trying to keep his expression neutral. “I can always fuck him in the dark.”

“Really.” Joanna pouts, lush lips hovering over his own as she leans above him. “I’m still your favorite though, aren’t I?”

“I haven’t even met him yet.” If there’s one flaw, it’s Joanna’s jealousy. “And he is my mate.”

“In name only.” Joanna chides, “That country bumpkin can’t please you, not like me.”

When she slides down to take him into her mouth, Jensen isn’t inclined to disagree.

4.

While his mother speaks to the Ackles, Jared concentrates on the granite sculpture displayed near the large window. It's of two wolves, twisted together at the base, movements so fluid that they become one. It's a beautiful piece, and Jared draws on it's beauty to temper his shame. His mate is not here to meet him, his absence speaks volumes.

"He's probably..." The excuse dies before it's even formulated. Donna Ackles is a lovely woman and she's been trying to explain the marked absence of her son for the past hour. She looks just as embarrassed as he feels. "Jensen loses track of time."

"We understand." His mother answers for him hurriedly, willing to lap up any and all excuses as long as the mating ceremony and marriage occur. "He's a lord and he must be very busy."

Color high in her cheeks, Donna takes another sip of her mint tea. "Quite."

"Extremely." Alan adds stiffly.

Uncomfortable silence descends once more, and Jared forces himself not to fidget under their appraising stares; he'd probably just track more mud in on their fine carpets. Jared and his mother's entrance had gone terribly. After muddying the floors unintentionally, the Ackles had kindly offered house slippers much to their chagrin.

It's clear Jared doesn't belong here, the sitting room is larger than their home and the servants are dressed better than they are. The butler, Jeffrey Morgan, had looked pained to seat them.

"You're a handsome boy." Donna ventures, smiling at him gently. "Your hair, in particular."

Jared touches a long strand self-consciously, he's seen that the men wear their hair closely shorn and artfully tousled while his hangs down his back. "We... I shall have it cut immediately."

“No,” Donna shakes her head, “That would be a pity.” She offers him a delicate cucumber sandwich, then considers him, green eyes appraising. “Well, perhaps a trim.”

Finally, after a few more stilted attempts at conversation, Alan offers them the option of retiring early and his mother takes it. Once they are shown to their rooms, Jared gives in to the deep shame that has been building within him since Jensen had not shown.

It’s obvious his mate doesn’t want him.

Jared looks at the large bed, runs his fingers over the big, white pillows; goose down. He’s never been around such finery. Tugging off the slippers, Jared curls his toes into the plush rug, sighing at the feel. It’s nice but he already misses the spongy marsh of the forest floor. Jared comes to a stop near the window, there’s a window seat lining the alcove but that’s not what gets his attention. Above the mantel is a painting, a young Lord caught expertly by the strokes of a very talented artist’s hand.

It’s Jensen, Jared knows it is. The man is standing straight, pride evident in the tiny smirk playing at his full lips, hand clasped over his coat of arms bearing cloak to rest on the jeweled hilt of a ceremonial sword. Curious, Jared looks further, takes in the strong jaw, blond, short hair and grass green eyes. His rejection makes more sense. An alpha who looks like Jensen will be horrified to mate with one such as him.

Turning away, Jared looks about the rest of the chamber, stomach sinking as he realizes he must’ve been shown to Jensen’s room. Behind an ornately painted screen is a steaming bath, shelves behind it lined with jars of scenting oil and soap.

Before Jared can move for his trunks, there’s a firm knock at his doors.

Unsure of what else to say, Jared calls, “Come in.”

“Hello, my lord.” Three women come in, the first holding two open jars of fragrant liquid, the second carrying large towels and the third a small, leather case. “Lord Ackles sent us.”

“For...” Jared looks at them warily. “ I d-don’t...”

“We’re to prepare you for the festivities tomorrow.”

Prepare.

Jared fights the sting of tears at the implied insult; a bath and toiletries... the Ackles think him sullied and unkept. What stings the most is that they’re not wrong. Based on the inquisitive looks the staff has been giving him all afternoon, Jared knows it’s because he’s ugly. They all must pity poor Jensen, who, as shown by the painting, is gorgeous.

“I’m Elisa, and don’t be shy, my lord.” The elder, matronly woman ushers him behind the screen with an authoritative sweep of her hand, “You just soak in there for a moment, we’ll do all the work.”

“I c-can’t undress with y-you here.”

“Of course you can,” She chides gently, “We’re all omegas; Lord Ackles specifically requested an all omega staff.”

Blushing furiously, Jared reluctantly strips off his clothes. In Delshire, they always dress in several layers, never knowing when the fickle weather would take a turn for the worst. Trying not to focus on his audience, Jared removes first his great cloak, then wool sweater, then his thin sweater, green lawn blouse, and then finally (and with most difficulty) his under garments.

When he stands naked, Jared rushes to get into the bath and the old woman chuckles as he sinks down to his chin in the hot water. Elisa kneels behind him, pours warm water over his hair, careful not to get any soap in his eyes before she massages a lather.

It feels like heaven, and after a moment, Jared relaxes, moving forward to help her. His hair is really entirely too long. As a child, his mother had been loathe to cut it because his father had worn his hair long and Jared’s was so much like his. As he’d grown older, Jared had just been too used to the length to take scissors to it.

Jared thinks he hears one murmur ‘such beautiful hair’ but he must’ve

misheard.

“You’re a lovely one, indeed.” Elisa says loudly, drawing a comb through his hair, gently working out the tangles. “Lovelier than was said.”

“W-what?”

“The people have been speaking of a rare beauty.”

Surprised, Jared bolts upright in the bath, slipping on a bar of soap that has slid beneath his bottom and falling back into the water. He comes up sputtering and coughing and the girls are giggling behind their hands.

“Are you alright, my lord?”

Shaking wet hair out of his face, Jared wipes at his eyes, “ They couldn’t have been speaking of me.”

Elisa looks at him in disbelief, before smiling wide and revealing a gap. “Oh, you’ll do just fine.”

5.

Jensen’s unsteady on his feet when he returns to the family manor just before dawn. He’d spent the night at *Whites* Gentlemen's club, taking the good natured jabs of his lucky, unmated peers. They all thought it was hilarious that he was to be shackled to a common omega. His best friends, Christian and Steve in particular led the charge on the insults.

After braving Jeffrey’s disappointed looks and being coldly informed that his chambers had been given to the bloody *whelp*, Jensen is about to fall into bed when the guest chamber doors burst open, there is but one who would enter unannounced.

“Not now, mother.”

“I have never been so ashamed in my whole life!”

Jensen buries his head beneath a pillow at her theatrics, “Can’t we do this

tomorrow? I have a raging headache.”

“And you’ve been out drinking!” She sounds far too scandalized when he does this so often, “On tonight of all nights? As if it’s not enough to hear of your disgusting behavior, now, *our entire family* must suffer the embarrassment of your haggard face at your own wedding? You think only of your wants and needs.”

“For god’s sake, Mother, stop bloody screaming!”

Donna sucks in an angry breath, nostrils pinched and hands clasped at her ivory bed robe. “Joshua would have never...”

Jensen’s stomach turns to ice at his brother's name, and the nausea that threatens to make him lose his dinner has nothing to do with drink.

Keeping his voice devoid of any emotion, Jensen sits up. “What would Joshua never do?”

“I didn’t mean it in that way.” Donna bites her lip, “It’s just, sometimes, Jensen, you can be so immature and I wish--”

“Unlike Joshua. The perfect son. The perfect gentlemen and--”

“Jensen, stop it.” This is a common argument between them. “Just....” She sighs, face pained. “Get some rest.”

6.

Tasked with a morning of isolation, Jared wanders to his mother’s chambers only to find her in the midst of a massage. It appears she’s enjoying her transition from peasant to lady. Jared keeps her company for a few minutes but it’s obvious she’s planning on being pampered for hours. When she suggests he do the same, Jared takes his leave. He wanders the large manor, taking in the spacious rooms, beautiful art and opulent décor. He can’t imagine living in a place such as this, a far cry from their simple three room cottage.

The entire manor is in upheaval, servants rushing to and fro with preparations for his wedding. Jared’s just in the way, and Jeffrey’s helpful suggestion he retire to

the gardens proves that. He's nearing the gardens Jeffrey has kindly pointed him to when he hears voices. Thinking it may be Jensen or the Ackles, he ducks into a shadowed alcove, praying to be over looked.

Four people come into view, three men and a woman, the same one who had shorn his hair to midback. They're all speaking loudly, not a care for decorum.

Jared's cheeks burn when he realizes they are talking about him.

"The poor boy, Lord Ackles will eat him alive." The tallest man says, "Jensen isn't the faithful type."

"You shouldn't speak of our lord so informally."

"I've had his cock up my ass, I feel like I've earned the right."

"And I've had it in my mouth but you don't see me braggin'!"

Jared's blood runs cold as the group laughs noisily before the girl shushes them.

"Mm," The short man agrees after his laughter dies. "Jensen may be amazing in bed, but who wants to be mated to a rake?"

"And the boy is so *timid*!" The girl adds, "He barely spoke a word last night, mostly stammered and stuttered his way through."

"And filthy, judging by the bath water I had to cart out this morning."

"Speaks like a country peasant too! No finer than you and I."

Jared wants to sink into the floor, he's mortified. He isn't normally so dirty, but traveling for two weeks and the storm, they hadn't had time to stop. Last night, he'd been tired and trying to be nice and...

"You're both imbeciles," The third man retorts, "Jensen was with Lady Joanna last night, couldn't even be bothered to greet his omega. David was at *Whites* and apparently Jensen is saying the boy is too plain for his liking."

"Either way, I give it a day after Seclusion for Jensen to come back to my bed."

“I don’t even think he’ll make it through Seclusion.” The tall man winks, “ He always says he can’t stay away from me.”

The group walk away, chattering without a thought for their careless words and Jared slumps against the cold stone of the wall, eyes filled with tears.

7.

Head pounding with remnants of drink, Jensen goes through the motions of his mating ceremony. Boredom overtaking him, his eyes drift over to the man kneeling beside him, his face cloaked with the ceremonial silver cloth. All Jensen knows of his mate is that he’s tall, not as tall as Jensen himself but his coltish legs hold the promise of continued growth. The boy is 16? 17? Jensen’s not sure, he hadn’t been inclined to listen to any of his father’s proffered facts regarding his mate.

Carefully, Jensen looks over the audience, lips twisting into a smile when Joanna catches his eye and winks saucily at him. As much as Jensen regrets his upcoming sequestration with Jared, he’s looking forward to finally being able to knot someone. It’s the only way to produce children in Weres and he’d never risk an illegitimate child, regardless of what his mother thinks of his morals.

Jensen continues to scan the audience until his father glares at him and he brings his attention back to their high Alpha who, coincidentally is pronouncing them mated and calling for the bite.

Not exactly excited to set eyes on his mousy, country bride, Jensen raises the fine cloth with some reluctance, before casting it off.

Wide hazel eyes framed by long, dark lashes stare back up at him and Jensen feels like he’s been kicked in the chest. Joanna is as blind as she is stupid. The man before him, is anything but ugly or plain.

He’s...

He’s beautiful.

This --and *shit*, Jensen hasn’t even bothered to listen for his name--this man

kneeling next to him has exotic tip tilted cat like eyes that shift colors even as he stares into their depths. Coupled with an upturned nose, dimples, a wide kissable mouth and thick, chestnut hair that tumbles past his shoulders; his mate is stunning.

It's not until his father coughs loudly behind him, that Jensen realizes he's staring. The crowd has started to murmur uncomfortably and the boy is blushing red, color creeping up his neck to stain his cheeks. He looks as terrified as his mother does.

Jensen swiftly bends, hand sinking into soft hair to tug the boy's head back and expose his pale neck. He noses at the fragrant hollow, taking in the scent of his omega--pine, crisp bright vanilla and something else, something entirely his. The boy's breaths are loud in his ear, Jensen savors the spike of adrenaline he can sense in him before baring his teeth, incisors lengthening to sink into his flesh.

At the sweet taste of him, Jensen's instantly addicted, half hard and furious at the lack of control. He's heard about bonding being intense but he hadn't expected it to feel like this, the slam of emotion robs him of breath. It's as if he can feel everything his mate is feeling, waves of anxiety, fear and reproach crash over him before the bond solidifies and the intense feeling recede.

The omega is shaking when Jensen pulls away, tongue sweeping over the bite marks left for all to see. They stand and the crowd begins to clap, it's then Jensen learns his mate's name as the high Alpha announces their union.

Jared.

8.

Jared's nervous, he hasn't been able to calm his heart since the ceremony. He feels different; uncomfortable. It's as if his skin is stretched too tight. It's similar to the way he feels during the full moon but very different. More than the restlessness, there's heat curling low in his belly, and between his thighs Jared knows his body is preparing itself.

Throughout the celebration dinner, Jensen hasn't strayed far from his side. The other man is constantly touching and brushing against him. At first Jared was sure it was accidental but as the night wears on and the alcohol flows freely,

Jensen's touches grow deliberate.

Their guests are watching them-- whispering-- and shame makes Jared's cheeks bloom vivid color. He nearly chokes on his roast pheasant when Jensen's hand lands on his knee beneath the table, and stays there. Chancing a glance at Jensen, Jared sees the other man is completely blasé, talking with two of his friends a shorter alpha named Christian (who surprisingly wears his hair long) and another fair headed man Jared cannot place.

When Jensen's hand moves slowly up his thigh, fingers massaging the muscles of his thigh, Jared feels humiliated. This is what one does with a loose woman, not a respected mate. Jared looks across the great hall to the dozens of guests to see if any have noticed. No one seems the wiser but a beautiful blond in a vivid turquoise gown with a plunging neckline is glaring at him. Her hair is upswept in a complicated twist of plaits and jewels; a beta.

Not knowing what to do, Jared gives her a tentative smile. The kindness is not returned.

"Why are you staring at Lady Joanna?" Jensen slurs in his ear, breath reeking of brandy and Jared stiffens at the name.

"J-joanna?" Jared recalls the gossip he's overheard and his heart twists. "Is she..." The question dries on his tongue. "She's beautiful."

Jensen snickers, "She is."

Jared's eyes drop to the tablecloth in shame, thinking to spare himself more pain, he says, "I have a headache."

Jensen lifts a brow, before his smile grows, "Eager are we?"

Before Jared can protest, Jensen is clinking his fork against his glass, making their excuses as they take their leave. It all happens so quickly, one moment he's ensconced in the safety of public and the next he's being swept into the waiting carriage and driving to the small manor to serve their Seclusion amidst deafening well wishes.

By the time the carriage comes to a stop in front of the country estate, Jensen is much more alert. He's still sitting uncomfortably close, but Jared isn't as terrified as he was before, especially since he hasn't forced him to do anything. In fact, Jensen has been silent the half days journey, speaking only to offer Jared a light meal of dried meat and oatcakes when the carriage halted for necessities.

When they arrive, Jensen helps him out of the carriage, hands tight on his waist and Jared cringes at being treated like a woman. Jared looks around the house apprehensively as they enter, Jensen close behind him. It's much smaller than the house in the city, and Jared instantly falls in love with the rustic walls and inviting wooden furniture piled with dozens upon dozens of hand made pillows. The house is rectangular, there's the large open two first rooms and then a long hallway leading to what Jared presumes are the bedchambers.

"You go on ahead," Jensen pushes him towards the back, and Jared casts a nervous look over his shoulder. "I'll be right there."

The sultry look in Jensen's eyes only heighten Jared's fear and apprehension. But beneath that, there's more and judging by the flare of Jensen's nostrils he can sense it. The bite of an alpha always forces an omega's first heat, and Jared is no different. He can feel the licks of desire tingling down his spine, knows that in an hours time he won't be able to resist his husband even if he wanted to.

The bedchamber is dark, dusk leaving the room in shadows. This room is as simple as the rest of the house. Directly adjacent the door is an enormous bed which takes up most of the room. It's simply dressed in blue sheets, a thick black bear fur over the end. On the left side there's a small table and two chairs, a game of chess set up atop it, on the right there's a large book shelf, filled with novels.

There's a huge fireplace opposite the bed, and when he sees wood stocked, Jared busies himself with starting a fire. Jared realizes his mistake belatedly as the fire provides not only heat but light to the entire room.

Jared doesn't know what's expected of him tonight. The one time he'd timidly asked his mother she'd gone red and stuttered about letting his body lead him, whatever that meant. In a few short moments his virginity would be no more. Knees weak, Jared stumbles over to the bed and sinks down at the edge. He

takes a few deep, stabilizing breathes, looking up when Jensen saunters into the room a platter in one hand.

“Fruits from the kitchens.” Jensen drops the plate on the table, not caring when chess pieces go flying. “Let’s save them for after we work up an appetite.”

Without preamble, Jensen strips off his white dress coat, advancing.

“W-wait!” Jared holds out both his hands as if to ward him off, heart jumping into his throat. “You s-should...”

“Should what?” Jensen parrots back, tone lightly mocking. “No worries, my love. I’ll take care of you.”

Before Jared can list all the reasons why Jensen shouldn’t, the older man’s mouth seals over his. Jared’s, never been kissed before, and this kiss is furious, packed with heat and barely restrained passion. It’s nothing like he gentle, sweet kisses he’d daydreamed of. This kiss is dirty and filled with lust. Jensen’s tongue is in his mouth, hands traveling down his back and grabbing his bottom.

Jared yelps, hands scrambling against Jensen’s dress shirt as he struggles to remember how to breathe. It’s too much, too soon but his body is refusing to cooperate, with every touch, his heat inches closer to the surface, and he finds himself pulling Jensen closer.

Jensen chuckles against his mouth before he tips them down onto the bed. Jensen lands over him, hands carding through his hair, pushing his head back as he mouths down his neck and sucks at his pulse point. The moment Jensen’s tongue laps over the mating bite, Jared moans at the intense pleasure, sound loud in the quiet room.

“That’s it, love.” Bright, smoldering green eyes stare down at him, and Jensen’s fingers tighten in his hair. “You’re so fucking perfect.”

The coarse language gives Jared pause but before he can clear his mind, another wave of heat rushes over him. As if he’s outside of himself, Jared watches himself pull over him, legs naturally parting when his mate nudges a knee in between.

Shame mixes with sharp arousal, and Jared's scent heightens as heat sets in fully. He's wet now, he can feel his own slick dripping down his thighs and he hates himself even as he lifts his hips, helps Jensen unlace his breeches and pull them down his legs with his hose and shoes.

"You're wet," Jensen gasps against his lips, hand working down between them, "Knew you would be, *smelled* it on you, that's the thing about omegas."

Jared barely hears him, he's too busy crying out because Jensen's hand is around his cock, squeezing and stroking in slow pulls from base to tip. He's never touched himself and the sensations are overwhelming, set his blood on fire. Every instinct in Jared demands he roll over and submit, so when Jensen turns him unto his belly Jared goes willingly, arches his back, ass in the air.

The appreciative sound Jensen makes causes Jared to hide his burning face in the sheets, hands gripping them.

"Mine." Jensen growls, coming behind him, rough fingers ripping off Jared's white shirt to leave him completely naked. "*Every single inch of you.*"

Jared squirms, gasping when Jensen touches his bottom, takes a cheek in each palm to massage and part them; expose his wet hole. He shouts, eyes flying open when Jensen's tongue probes his most intimate place; licks and laps at his hole. When a finger pushes in alongside his tongue, Jared's back arches, hips pushing back of their own volition.

"That's it, love, so fucking tight." Jensen praises huskily. "Move like that, just like that."

Jared can't respond, just whimpers as Jensen adds a second finger, scissoring the digits apart to stretch him open. He can sense where this is going, now that it won't be long before he has his mate inside of him where he belongs. One moment Jared feels the burning stretch of being too full and the next, he's empty, Jensen pulling his fingers free and kneeling behind him.

At the feel of the blunt head of Jensen's cock pressing against him, fear trickles in through the haze of Jared's heat. Unable to stop himself, he whispers Jensen's name in plea, shifting on his knees and Jensen rubs a surprisingly soothing and gentle hand down his spine, calming him as he slowly presses his cockhead

inside.

“Easy, relax for me, baby, let me in.”

Jared grits his teeth, nodding when Jensen blankets his back with his body, lips brushing the top of his spine as rocks in. Tears sting at Jared’s eyes at the burn, the stretch of his muscles and the intensity of it all. The first few thrusts are painful, warring with the pleasure Jared can still feel from having his alpha inside of him, and then the pain vanishes on the fifth stroke as if it never was, Jared’s body relaxing completely under Jensen’s in submission and acceptance.

Murmuring encouragement, Jensen thrusts in and out of him, cock thick and long as it drives inside of Jared hitting a spot deep inside of him that makes him see stars. Jared actually screams when Jensen snakes a hand beneath, wraps it around Jared’s leaking erection as he thrusts steadily.

It feels like rushing down the river, Jared is about to become unhinged, a storm building inside of him of mindless pleasure until he’s lost, crying out and clamping down on Jensen deep inside of him, moaning at the feel of the answering hot spurts of his alpha’s release inside of him before he presses back unto Jensen’s knot.

Jensen’s groaning now, unintelligible words harsh and hot at Jared’s ear as he shoves viciously forward until Jared’s seated completely on his knot, locked around him as Jensen comes and comes, spilling his hot seed deep inside of him. Jared’s vision goes grey at the edges and he collapses down on the bed, Jensen falling heavy over him.

Jensen rolls them unto their sides, pulling the tangled sheets over their joined bodies. For a moment, with the fire blazing and Jensen whispering against his skin, Jared feels warm, safe with his mate locked to him; as it should be.

But then Jensen speaks, words lights and cruel.

“Had I known mating sex was that good, I would’ve married you long ago.” He chuckles, “You could be the best I’ve had so far, with a bit of practice.

Jared chokes on bile, the seed seeping inside of him suddenly making him nauseous. Cold sets in. He doesn’t respond.

10.

Jensen wakes to the mouth watering smell of fresh ground coffee and cinnamon, his stomach growls in appreciation. He loves that his staff anticipates his every need. Last night had been very satisfying, Jensen enjoyed himself thoroughly. He had taken his omega several times despite knowing he should let the boy rest. Their bodies are perfectly compatible.

Just thinking about Jared now is making Jensen hard. When Jensen reaches for him, however, Jared's gone, sheets cold. Jensen frowns, pulling on a thick robe before leaving the room. First coffee and then some more of his mate, wherever he is.

Jensen walks into the kitchen, he stops short. Instead of the housekeeper his family employs, Jared's at the table, pouring coffee into a white tea cup before turning to place rolls on the matching plates. His long hair hangs over his broad shoulders, covering the many love bites littered over his neck.

"Alice knows to serve breakfast," Jensen frowns, "This is unacceptable."

Jared's eyes fly up to meet his in surprise. He wets his lips, "I turned Janet away this morning."

Jensen can only assume Janet is the housekeeper's actual name, "Then who made all of this?"

"I did."

"You?"

"Cooking is something I enjoy." Jared motions for Jensen to sit down. "I didn't have time, so it's fairly simple. I hope you like it."

Jensen glances down at the poached eggs, ham and warm biscuits. He's truly married a country boy. "You prepared this?"

Jared smiles shyly, nodding. "I did."

“It’s inappropriate for a Lord to do such common tasks.” Jensen seats himself and takes a sip of the coffee finding it prepared exactly how he likes it, two creams and one sugar. “But I suppose while we’re here it wouldn’t hurt.”

Aware of Jared’s eyes on him, Jensen picks up his fork and begins to eat. Everything tastes amazing, better than the way the housekeeper does it.

“Is it...” Jared bites his bottom lip nervously. “ Do you like it?”

“It’s fine.” Jensen lies, he has no idea why he doesn’t tell Jared how delicious it is but this entire scene is making him uncomfortable. It feels too familiar, like an idealistic picture of mated life. The only thing missing are cubs nipping at his heels. Jensen cringes at the thought of actually starting a family even though that’s what the Seclusion is supposed to accomplish.

“I could change it for tomorrow,” Jared suggests quickly, “And I don’t know what foods you prefer, but I love venison. Janet says there’s a butcher and I was planning on making a stew for lunch.”

“Venison?”

Jared nods quickly, “Unless there’s something else you want?”

“There is.” Jensen drinks the rest of his coffee quickly, eyes focusing on Jared’s bee stung lips, He’s still fascinated by the hint the love bites he’s left all over Jared’s neck and chest last night. He takes Jared’s hand. “You.”

Jared turns bright red, there’s something endearing about a man who still blushes. “Where are we going?”

“Back to bed.”

11.

They spend the next few days in their chambers, and when Jared gets too sore, Jensen teaches him different ways of pleasuring one another. Jared thinks he’ll die of embarrassment and pleasure the first time Jensen takes him in his mouth, tongue swirling over the head of his cock before sucking him all the way to the base. The noises Jensen makes when Jared tries to do the same only heightens

his pleasure.

Now, for the first time in four days, they're venturing outside. They spend the afternoon exploring their surroundings, mostly in silence with a few bouts of conversation. It's not exactly lively but Jared feels as if Jensen is warming to him, and he's finding out more about his husband. It's good to know more than the alarming gossip he'd overheard.

They're walking along the path back to the estate when Jared's attention is caught by a cluster of flowers just off the road.

"We have these in Delshire," Jared excitedly plucks a purple flower, "It's a Dahlia."

Jensen gives him a fond look; he's taken to wearing plains clothing while they're out here and Jared admires him much more in the earth tones than the constricting, brash colors of court, "Alright...?"

"They smell heavenly."

"They do." Jensen bends over next to where Jared's gathering the flowers but instead of sniffing them, noses at his neck. "And so do you."

Hiding his pleased smile, Jared replies, "I smell like you."

"Exactly." Jensen drags him by the hand, past the road, into the forest. They walk a ways until the trees part around a deep creak. Jensen strips off his shirt and his breeches follow. "Come."

Jared inclines his head to the creak, where the waters are no doubt mind numbingly cold. "You want to jump in?"

"Come on." It's the closest to playful that Jensen has ever been so Jared pulls off his tall boots and shirt, but leaves his breeches. "*Naked*, Jay."

Jay.

No one has ever given him an affectionate moniker and Jared finds himself pushing down his embarrassment and removing his last article of clothing.

Jensen grabs his hand and they take a running jump into the water. Jared shrieks and Jensen yells when they hit the icy surface. They both come up laughing, Jensen pushing Jared's wet hair away from his face with warm fingers.

"Alright?"

Jared nods, watching water clump on Jensen's dark gold lashes.

12.

"How have you bested me?"

Jensen doesn't sound angry but Jared regrets not hiding his skill. Isn't that what his mother always told him? Alphas don't want mates who exceed their own abilities. That's not attractive.

"I got lucky." Jared lies, retrieving both of their arrows.

"Nonsense." Jensen waves his words away, "I know skill when I see it."

"I was raised in the country," Jared begins to apologize, "I'm sure your skill far-
_"

"Jay, we both know I'm a terrible shot." At Jared's protests, Jensen cues up another arrow, "Then would you place an apple on your head for me, as I am a veritable William Tell?"

Jared grimaces, smiling when Jensen bursts out in laughter.

"I thought not." Jensen drops his bow to the floor. "I may not be an excellent marksman but I am skilled at other things."

"Like what?" The question scarce leaves his lips before Jared realizes what Jensen is implying.

Jensen pulls him close, lips brushing over Jared's in a sweet kiss. "You enrapture me."

Every word, every compliment Jensen gives him is warm and worrying all at

once. Jared knows that Jensen's a rake, of course he's charming. He wonders just how many times Jensen has said the same words to others.

"What are your thoughts?"

Pushing away all doubts, Jared forces himself to smile in a manner he hopes is seductive, "I have some skills of my o-own I'd like to perfect."

Instead of the sultriness Jared expects, Jensen begins to laugh, great heaves that leave Jared fuming and storming away.

"Wait! Wait!" Jensen jogs after him, grabbing his wrist, "I'm not laughing at you, it's just. You're so innocent and adorable."

"Children are adorable."

"You are not a child, this I know." Jensen steps closer with purpose. "I find your seduction humorous because it is not needed. I am all you have known, Jared. That knowledge alone brings me to a frenzy." His finger trails over Jared's mouth, dips inside. "Only I know your taste, the sounds you make, the way you bite your lip when I thrust inside of you; knot you."

Cheeks blooming pink, Jared's breath goes erratic.

"I am all you will ever know."

Wordlessly, Jared nods, closing his eyes when Jensen's fingers undo the clasp holding his hair back. He's beginning to think Jensen has a strange fascination with it. When he says as much Jensen grins.

"I am fascinated by the way you moan when I pull it, especially when I have you on all fours, cock--"

Silencing the embarrassing words with his mouth, Jared kisses Jensen, tongue tracing the seam of his mate's lips before Jensen parts them.

After several moments of trading kisses, Jensen pulls away, eyes trained on Jared's swollen mouth. With a gentle push, he brings Jared to his knees, "You said something about practice?"

13.

A long while later, they're laying in bed, naked beneath the soft sheets. Jensen is watching Jared and Jared's looking at the shadows cast on the wall by the fire, watching the figures that take shape.

"What are your thoughts?"

"My father used to say that shadows were dreams born from our minds." Jared points to the corner, near the window. "What do you see there?"

"Nothing."

"I see a man; dancing."

"That sounds horrifying." Jensen replies dryly.

Ignoring him, Jared continues. "The man is happy, he's coming home to his family. He's been away for a long while."

Jensen's quiet, and for several moments the sound of the fire crackling is the only one in the room. They've never spoken of it, even though it's what brought them together.

"How old were you when your father passed?"

"Nearly two."

Jared is only seventeen, and his father died fifteen years ago. "You don't remember him then."

"No, but I try to." Jared rolls away, laying on his back as he continues to watch the shadows. "Sometimes... sometimes, I think I do. If I concentrate hard enough, I remember his hands, how big they were and warm. I recall how he'd set me upon his shoulders and race down the hill to make me laugh while it rained. He worked in the mines, you know, so when it rained he was able to stay in with us." His voice is quiet, soft enough to be taken by a breeze. "B-but it's probably just a story my mother told me that I converted into a memory."

“He...” Jensen clears his throat, he doesn't know what words to say; has never cared to chase away the sadness of another. “He did a great thing for my family. Your father was a good man.”

“I know.”

“We are forever in your debt.”

The words are meant to make Jared happy but they seem to have the opposite effect. Instead, his mate turns away, giving Jensen his back.

14.

The remaining two weeks of Seclusion pass quickly in a haze of kisses and fiery nights. Jared's worries have eased considerably. Here in the countryside, Jared doesn't feel out of place. As a result, he's not so tongue tied. Surprisingly, Jensen seems to listen to what he has to say, responding with tales of his own. Jared knows that Jensen spent much of his childhood in the country estate climbing trees and chasing squirrels with his grandparents. He knows Jensen has a wicked sense of humor and dangerous charm. He also knows that Jensen prefers the classics to modern literature and can take hours to make a move in chess. All of this makes Jared like Jensen even more, especially when Jensen is kind to him.

As the days pass, Jared grows more and more uneasy about their return. All of his old doubts surface. He hasn't forgotten the conversation he overheard, and he's well aware of Jensen's reputation. However, Jared thinks Jensen may have changed. He's open and friendly, constantly touching and kissing him without the lascivious of their wedding dinner; that has to mean something. Besides, Jared refuses to judge Jensen by his past, all of those things had been done before they were mated Jensen certainly would not seek others out now.

“I cannot wait to return.”

They're seated in front of the fireplace, Jared sitting between Jensen's widespread legs, his back to Jensen's chest. Jensen's propped against the trunk at the foot of the bed, and they're naked, blanketed only by a heavy quilt they've

taken from the bed.

“W-what do you like about the city?”

“Everything.” Jensen replies, “I’m bored to tears here.”

Stung, Jared stares into the dancing flames, “Are you bored now?”

Jensen laughs, and Jared doesn’t miss his lack of response. “You’ll realize what I mean once you get accustomed to being in the city, there’s nothing like it.”

15.

Jensen’s trying to read through the shipping documents his father asked him to review but his attention keeps being pulled away. He smiles when his eyes land on the vase of purple Dahlias sitting at the edge of his desk that Jared had brought in just this morning. As much as he’d resented the idea, Jensen is finding mated life to agree with him. Jared is shy, but sweet, intelligent and compassionate and he never denies Jensen in bed. He’s perfect actually.

Donna breezes into his office, a vase of flowers in her hands. She stops short as she sees her usual spot taken. “What is this?”

“I believe Jared bested you in your floral arrangements, Mother.”

“What kind of flowers are these? They’re lovely.”

Jensen takes off his reading glasses, “Jay says they’re called Dahlias.”

“Jay?” She muses, “That’s sweet.”

Jensen curdles; he feels defensive for some reason. “What are you implying?”

“Nothing,” Donna smooths down her mint skirts. “It’s just you look well rested.”

“I can assure you I’ve been getting *very* little sleep.”

At the crude jest, his mother wrinkles her nose, “No need to be crass, Jensen.”

“Yes, well, you know me.”

“I do, which is why I’m so thrilled you’ve reformed. There’s been no gossip and you’ve remained home every evening since your return.” Ignoring his obvious discomfort, Donna presses a kiss to his cheek before she takes her leave. “ I’m so glad to see you settled; Joshua would be proud.”

Joshua would be proud.

Anger rises up inside of him, thick and unrelenting. His parents never miss an opportunity to let him know he falls short of their golden child. Everything he does is compared to what Joshua would have done, and not for the first time Jensen knows he’s not the one they want.

What hurts the most however, is that he agrees. The guilt eats away at him every day; Joshua should be here and Jensen should be the one buried beneath the earth. Jensen wishes his brother hadn’t gone in after him that day; wishes Joshua had left him to his deserved fate.

With a curse, Jensen grabs the decanter of brandy from the cabinet and pours himself a glass with shaking hands. He realizes with a bit of shock this is the first sip of alcohol he’s had since his wedding celebration nearly a month past. The liquor burns before it warms his chest, dampening his guilt and pain as it always does.

After his third glass, the shipping documents are forgotten and Jensen sends a runner to Chris’ estate, letting him know that he’s going to be at *Whites’* in a private room.

16

After dinner, Jared gets undressed quickly, stepping behind the dressing screen to do so. Although he’s no longer self-conscious about his body, he’s still not as uninhibited as Jensen who goes to bed stark naked.

The return to the city has not gone as he had feared. Jared is content, slowly learning how to speak properly and how to behave in public with the tutor provided to him by Donna. And Jensen. well, he has proven Jared wrong. His

husband has not returned to the debauched lifestyle he once enjoyed, instead he remains by Jared's side. They've gone out together, Jensen taking him to the opera and horse races. Each time, Jared hadn't missed the admiring glances his mate drew but Jensen had stayed with him explaining the Italian words at the show and the subtleties of wagering at the track. Even his mother has remarked on how happy he is.

When Jared steps out from behind the screen, Jensen's far from naked but fully dressed.

Jared falters, hand twisting in the hem of his white nightshirt when Jensen doesn't spare him a glance. "Are you g-going somewhere?"

Jensen shrugs into his black brocade evening jacket, "Yes."

"Where?"

"An informal gathering, nothing to concern yourself with."

Everything in Jensen's tone warns Jared not to push, but he does. He can't help himself. There's only one place Jensen can be going. "Then I'll just get changed and go with you--"

"No need."

Biting his lip, Jared watches Jensen dab cologne behind his wrists. "Are you going to *Whites*?"

"Perhaps."

"Will Lady Joanna be in attendance?"

The words surprise both of them.

Jensen stills, sharp green eyes cutting into him. "I've no idea."

"Liar." Jared whispers, heart and hope splintering. He'd been an imbecile to think anything had changed; an idealistic fool. "You're lying to me."

“Excuse me?”

“You’re going to see her.”

“I don’t owe you any explanations.”

“I’m your husband.”

“Not by choice.”

The words feel like a punch to the stomach and Jared’s eyes smart, “I thought...I th-thought..”

“You thought what?” Jensen mimics cruelly, words slurring and Jared realises belatedly that he's drunk. "You thought we’d be a pretty little family? You’d lead me around by the balls? I fucked you, that’s it .”

Jared is soshocked that he acts on reflex alone, and slaps Jensen, hard. The sound is loud in the silent room and both of them freeze as red blooms on Jensen’s cheek.

“You hit me.” Jensen sounds dazed, fingers touching the red mark. “You bloody shrew!”

“And you’re an a-ass!”

“Little *bitch*.” Jensen rushes forward, slamming Jared against the wall with enough force to knock the wind out of him. He stares down at him, eyes blazing as his fingers dig into Jared's forearms. “ I am your alpha, and you’d do well to remember so before you speak to me in a manner such as that.”

“I’m your husband.” He whsipers, not knowing what else to say.

"Is this what you want, Jared?" It doesn’t escape Jared’s notice that Jensen’s aroused, erection digging into his hip. "What you feel is *yours*?"

When he holds Jared’s gaze, rolls his hips with purpose Jared nearly vomits. “If all you want is a body to f-fuck, then go to one of your w-whores.”

“I will.” Jensen releases him, smile twisting cruelly. “At least they’re not inexperienced little, country virgins who don’t know how to pleasure a man.”

Jensen walks away, calling for a servant to ready a horse as Jared stands alone in their bedroom shaking.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Point out mistakes please! This is unbetaed, so that is a warning in itself.

Notes for the Chapter:

Did you check the warnings? Go do that.

You're back? Yeah, okay, asshole Jensen is in rare form this chapter :D

15.

When Jensen is shown through the doors of Whites, he's greeted by a large, boisterous crowd. In the private room, his usual friends are piled into the velvet lined booths. The place reeks of the alcohol that has been spilt on the worn wooden floors and smoke from the favored pipes of the patrons. It makes Jensen's stomach roll. He regrets coming already, debates whether or not he can slip out unnoticed.

"Jen! I didn't expect to see you back any time soon. Last I'd heard you were loved up with that sweet omega of yours." Motioning him over, Christian shoves one of the bar maids off the chair next to him. "Sit your ass down! Tell me all about married life, is the sex that good? You've been gone for weeks."

As soon as Jensen takes a seat, a glass of whiskey is thrust into his hand. Jensen drinks it in one go, eager to forget the fight with Jared and numb the guilt coursing through him. However, the usual comfort the liquor gives him is lacking, he can still see the wrecked expression on Jared's face.

"Hey," Christian's voice is obnoxiously loud in his ear, "C'mon, don't hold out on me. The only omegas I've ever had are the sloppy whores at *Belle's Tavern*, gotta be different with a virgin--

"I'd like to remind you that you're speaking of my mate." Jensen cuts in sharply, eyes hard. He ignores Christian's half hearted apology. "Shut up and get me another drink."

“Where’s the husband this evening?” Steve bounds over and leans over the table, obnoxious smile pasted on his face. “Home knitting for the cubs?”

A headache is forming right behind Jensen’s eyes, “I’m not in the mood.”

“Ah,” Christian gives him a knowing look, “It’s *that* kind of visit, is it? Feeling frustrated?”

“Christian--”

“Calm down, Jen.” Steve nudges him. “I suspect you’re in the mood for what’s coming your way.”

Jensen looks behind him to find Jason sauntering to the table. The slim blonde is wearing obscenely tight black breeches paired with a red shirt. The shirt is open to nearly the waist, the boy’s muscles on tantalizing display. Jason is beautiful and he knows it; Jensen’s regularly used Jason’s services in the past.

“Lord Ackles,” The blonde sidles up to him, sitting on Jensen’s lap. “What a pleasure to have you tonight; I’ve missed you.”

“Jason,” The other man’s arms twine around Jensen’s neck and all Jensen can think of is how wrong he smells. He’s also aware of the others watching him, cataloguing his reactions. “I see you’re as affectionate as always.”

“Always for you. ” He straddles Jensen’s thighs, hands smoothing up the lapels of Jensen’s shirt to play with his necktie. “ I thought you were firmly settled into the boring mated life. You had us all very worried.”

Jensen returns the smile weakly, “Not exactly.”

Chuckling, Jason leans close, rubs up against him as he shifts in his lap. Normally, this would make Jensen excited but tonight he feels nothing. He doesn’t know why he’s here, why he’s so determined to ruin the one thing that has brought him peace since Joshua died.

“Join me upstairs?”

Christian and Steve are watching him expectantly and there's not enough alcohol to make him want Jason, but Jensen finds himself following the boy to his rooms.

16.

The next morning, Jensen isn't present at the breakfast table but it's not as if Jared expected him to be. He'd spent the entire night awake in their bed, waiting for the sound of his footsteps but there had been nothing. Jensen hasn't come back to the manor which means he'd spent his night elsewhere. The way Alan avoids his eyes, prove that Jensen didn't even bother coming home.

Fastidiously ignoring the knowing looks from the staff and the pitying ones from the Ackles, Jared forces himself to eat as if nothing is amiss. The smoked pork, fresh croissants and marmalade taste like ashes in his mouth.

"What do you have planned for today, Jared? Any invitations for outings?" Donna asks, sipping her water. "We're having lovely weather, I can't imagine that there aren't any events."

At the reminder of his complete rejection into polite society, Jared loses what little of his appetite remained. "I have nothing planned except for the tutor."

"Oh." Donna pats her hair, "Well, I'm sure the invitations will come... eventually."

"Why don't you go on a ride here, tour the grounds? We have many fine mounts stabled," Alan volunteers, "I don't know if Jensen showed you."

Jared looks to his mother, "I thought we'd take the day to go to Crosby street."

"Shopping?" Donna perks up, expression eager. "If you're purchasing new garments, I simply *must* introduce you to my seamstress. She does impeccable stitching and her designs are *so elegant*. I always receive so many compliments. I know there's been a new shipment of silks from the Orient; dyed fabrics!" It's the most excited Jared's ever seen her. "I know, why don't I come with you!"

Sherri nods, and her enthusiasm can only stem from the fact Donna has never asked to go anywhere with her, "That would be great."

This is his mother's dream, strolling down Crosby street with a respected lady such as Donna Ackles. Jared, however, would be bored to tears. Furthermore, he'd rather not be the object of public scrutiny at the moment.

"Why don't you two go together?" Jared suggests, placing his napkin over his plate. "I think I'll take Alan's suggestion; it is a nice day for a ride."

"No, Jared, we should all go."

"I'd really prefer the fresh air, Mama."

"But you can't go alone," Alan beckons Jeffrey forward. The butler comes at once, hands at his back. "Escort Jared when he's ready to leave."

Jared tamps down on his frustration on not being allowed to be on alone. He'll never get used to these 'escorts' and is not entirely sure of their purpose. For all their sophistication, city Weres don't trust one another. Last night had shown him that they had cause not to.

After the dishes are cleared, his mother and lady Ackles go prepare for their outing. Jared is left on his own. He hadn't realized how much time he spent with Jensen until the man was gone. The worst of it is that Jared has no idea what he did to make Jensen's attentions stray. He's angry that even a small part of himself is trying to take the blame when it's Jensen who's the unfaithful cad.

Jeffrey remains posted outside of his chambers, so Jared rushes to get dressed. When he emerges in tan breeches, a white shirt and riding jacket, Jeffrey leads him down the east hallway and out through the servants quarters.

Donna wasn't wrong, it is a beautiful day; the sun is bright, the leaves changing and the breeze holds the bite of the upcoming winter. In a rare mood, Jeffrey is pointing out the various foliage as they walk along.

They're nearly to the stable doors when a carriage returns. It's Jensen.

Before the footmen can dismount, the door is flung open and Jensen tumbles out, stumbling. He looks like hell warmed over, dark shadows beneath his eyes.

Jensen looks dumbstruck. "Jared.."

Frozen, Jared stares back at him, eyes falling to the dark bruise above Jensen's collar. He hadn't put that there, and beneath the cologne Jensen's doused on, he can smell the beta who had. "I hope you had a nice night."

"It's not." Jensen pulls at his shirt, straightening his jacket hastily. "I went for drinks."

"All night?"

"Yes."

It's clear Jensen's lying.

"I can smell him on you."

Jeffrey coughs uncomfortably behind him, "Master Jensen, perhaps you should retire."

Jensen looks at Jared, mouth working over soundless words before he finally turns away, "Perhaps I shall."

17.

The exchange with Jensen that morning outside the stables is the first and last mention of that night. Jensen doesn't return to their bed and for that Jared's grateful. It's unbelievable that Jensen doesn't even bother to try, and it hurts Jared more than he would ever admit. As the days wear on, the mood in the household shifts. Alan is quiet and Donna as well. It's like living in a mausoleum, no one speaks.

"I can see that all is not well between you and your husband."

Jared shrugs, continuing to knead the dough, taking out his frustration as he does. He'd known this conversation was coming, his mother had been throwing increasingly worried glances between Jensen and him at the table.

"Would you like to speak of it?"

There's no way Jared can or will tell his mother that Jensen has returned to his mistress. He doesn't want to burden her with his problems.

"Everything is fine, just a small argument."

Sharon places a gentle hand on his shoulder, "I knew those rumors were false."

Jared wonders, not for the first time, if his mother only sees what she wants to. It's painfully obvious that she needs this marriage to end well for him. More so than even Jared, she's built a fantasy of what his mated life would be like. He supposes it's what comforts her in his father's absence.

"The young Lord may be a bit wild," Sharon continues, going to the stove to stir the simmering caramel with a wooden spoon methodically. "But he'll calm down in time."

Maybe she wasn't as ignorant of Jensen's behavior as Jared previously thought. Relieved that he can speak frankly, Jared lets the dough rest. "I don't know what to say to him, how to talk with him. He'sdifferent now. It isn't like it was before, when we were in Seclusion."

"He will settle down, Jared, I promise you." The smile she gives him is sympathetic. "That's the way of the gentry. "

"I won't accept unfaithfulness; Lord or not. If you ask me, these city Weres are the uncivilized lot, not us. I'm so sick of trying to be--"

"Jared." Donna says his name in a voice laced with shock.

Jared freezes as he looks to his left to find Donna at the kitchen door, hand clasped to her pearl necklace in astonishment.

"I.." Jared blushes furiously, thinking of all the things he had been saying. "I didn't mean--"

"You're *cooking*?" Donna breezes into the kitchen, looking behind her as if she expects servants to jump out. Her voice drops to a fervent whisper. "Why are you lowering yourself to such a task? What if someone happens upon you? What would people say!"

Jared's taken aback, "I only meant to--"

"Whatever you need, the staff will prepare it for you. I know you're not from the city but... this kind of behavior is unacceptable." Donna interjects firmly. "Please don't do anything to embarrass our family again."

The hypocrisy.

18.

Jared lays alone in the darkness of his chambers, pillow dampened with tears he'd been helpless to stop. He just wants to go home, to run back to Delshire and the understanding arms of his friends. He misses his simple life before his match. He wants to go back to before he even knew Jensen, before he allowed himself to foolishly be seduced in the span of two weeks.

God, Jensen must think him simple. Jared has no idea why Jensen affects him like this, why he still cares for a man who despises him; who used him like a whore.

Reality is far from his dreams. Before he'd been told of his match, Jared had dreamt of the day when he would marry his alpha. His intended would be handsome and kind hearted, gentle and compassionate. He'd love Jared, and him alone. They'd live their lives together in friendship and harmony. Jared would gladly bear his children, be showered with affection and love as they grew within his womb. His marriage is nothing like the stories his mother had told him of hers.

When the bed chamber door opens, Jared forces himself not to move beneath the sheets. He listens to Jensen as he undresses, washes his face at the vanity.

"I know you're awake."

Jared doesn't respond, sees no reason why he should.

Jensen huffs, throwing off the sheets on his empty side before clambering in. "You're such a child."

Gritting his teeth at the insult, Jared refuses to give Jensen the satisfaction of his attention. Instead, he pulls the sheets higher, covering his entire body.

When Jared feels Jensen's fingers on his arm, he jerks away outraged, "Don't."

"I have every right to touch you." Jensen growls, yanking him back. "You're mine."

"Go back to *Whites*."

"You can't deny me; you couldn't even if you wanted to."

Jared doesn't move because Jensen's right, no one would fault Jensen for taking what was his by law. So Jared stops struggling and lies still. He may have to suffer his husband's touch but he refuses to give him the satisfaction of any response.

"That's better." Jensen moves Jared unto his back, fingers brushing Jared's hair off his forehead. "Look, Jared, about the other night--"

"If you're going to talk, save your breath because I won't hear a word." The slight touch makes Jared tremble. "I may not be able to deny you my body but I don't owe you anything else."

"Jared," Jensen makes a sound of frustration, "I'm trying to explain."

"No need." Jared is proud that his voice doesn't shake. "Everyone knows where you were and with whom."

"It was nothing," The muscle in Jensen's jaw ticks, "I needed to...I meant to have a few drinks, play a round and come back. You don't understand how it gets, like I'm trapped."

"I smelled him on you."

"It's just sex."

The admission makes Jared want to scream, claw Jensen's eyes out. "You mean *fucking*. All you did w-was fuck me, isn't that what you said Jensen?" The

words still wound even days later, “You don’t owe me anything, me and that beta you were with are the same.”

“That’s not true. I needed to forget, for one night, Jared, just one night. Can’t you understand?” Jensen’s thumb catches a tear on Jared’s cheek that he hadn’t even known was falling. Jared tries to turn his face away, but Jensen holds him fast. “If it’s what you want, then, Jared, never again.”

“You may spout pretty words, but your actions betray you.”

Jensen stares down at Jared for several long, heart pounding moments before he rolls off him. Jared can’t even feel relief as Jensen gets dressed and leaves the room.

19.

The past few days have been extremely uncomfortable for Jensen. As much as he’s tried to reconcile with Jared, the omega rebuffed him at every opportunity. Jared hadn’t even looked in his direction when he informed him that they were accepting the Cassidy’s invitation to their daughter’s engagement dinner.

Now, as they prepare to depart, Jensen watches Jared tie his hair back with a thin, leather tie. Jared’s wearing a dark green velvet dinner jacket, trimmed in gold braid. The Ackles crest is vivid against the dark colors.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

At the cool response, Jensen bristles. “I hope you don’t plan on behaving like this when we’re dining with the Cassidys. It’s unbecoming.”

“I won’t do anything to embarrass you.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Jensen moves behind Jared, regarding their reflection in the mirror. “I refuse to have people gossiping--”

Jared laughs, “Oh, I’m sorry I thought you were jesting.”

“Can we behave like a happily married couple for one night?”

“Of course.”

20.

When the first course is presented-- a mixed green salad of apricots, dates and pecans topped with shrimp-- Jared finds himself at a loss. Apparently, the stifling dinners at the Ackles' had been informal. He stares down at the numerous knives and forks on either side of his intricately patterned china plate, unsure of which one to use. There are twelve in total. He tries to glance discretely at what the other guests are using but he can't see over the dinner glasses and matching champagne flutes. Jensen is seated to his left but he's deep in conversation with a small pretty, dark haired girl.

“Start from the outside and work your way in.” The man to his right whispers, startling him. “A general rule of thumb.”

“I uh...” Jared considers lying but decides against it, his confusion must've been obvious.. “Thank you, where I'm from, we only use three utensils.”

“I'm a firm believer that you only need three.” The man smiles, clear blue eyes lighting up. “I'm David Guintoli, fifteenth Earl of Essex.”

“Jared Pada... I mean Ackles; Jared Ackles.” Jared smiles gratefully, picking up the smallest, three pronged fork. “And thank you again.”

“So this magical land where you're allowed to eat with just three utensils? Tell me more.”

Jared's surprised at the genuine interest he can see in the other man's face, “Delshire.”

“A beautiful place, I passed through last Spring.”

“Really?”

“A colleague runs the mines.”

Jared tries not to let his distaste show, many good men have contracted lung disease and death in the mines. With the land not producing enough, the mines are the only alternative. “Oh.”

“I know that look.”

“I don’t mean any offense.”

“No, I detest the mines as well. It’s altogether a far too dangerous practice.” David takes a sip of his champagne, “But perhaps we should stick to polite conversation?”

“I think so.”

David grins, “How’s your salad?”

Jared can’t help but smile in return, “Excellent.”

“And your fork? It’s very important you use the proper fork.”

Jared can’t help it; he laughs, the sound catching the attention of their fellow diners, including Jensen. He doesn’t look pleased but Jared doesn’t care, in fact, he revels in the disapproval.

Jensen’s smile doesn’t reach his frigid green eyes. “Charming the guests, love?”

“I was wondering when you’d acknowledge me, Jensen.”

Jared looks between David’s smiling face and Jensen’s, “You’re acquainted?”

“Jensen and I attended the same boarding school.”

“It’s been too long, David.” Jensen’s hand settles over Jared’s atop the table. “Your presence was missed at the wedding.”

The action is not missed by David and his expression goes amused. “I regret not being able to witness it.”

Jared misses the days when he was shunned by society and left out of any events. Now he's invited to the events and ignored in person. Currently, he's standing at the edge of the manicured lawn, unsure of what to do with himself. None of these people are his friends, and none appear to even want to befriend him if the icy reception is any indication. They're Jensen's sort: rude and polished.

Relief floods him when midway through, David Guitonli walks in, eyes scanning the garden. When they land on Jared, his face breaks into a warm smile before he crosses to join him.

"Having a nice time?"

"Hardly." Jared answers weakly, "I don't think I've made a good impression. I keep saying the wrong things. And apparently, I didn't read the invitation carefully enough because everyone is wearing dove breeches and yellow brocade."

Davis shrugs, but he's wearing yellow as well. "Vultures, the lot of them."

"Aren't they your friends?" Jared flicks the shoulder of his embroidered jacket, "You're dressed precisely the same."

"I'm just naturally stylish, and they're not my friends. The only one I would call such is Jensen, and that's only because I remember what he was like before Joshua's death."

Curiosity piqued, Jared steps closer, "Who's Joshua?"

"How do you not...damn it." David blanches, "I shouldn't have said that; forget I mentioned him. If Jensen wanted that kept private it should remain so."

"Wait, David, please. There's so much I don't know...and I'd like to understand him more."

Looking about, David finally gives in. "Joshua was Jensen's older brother, he died in a riding accident eight years ago. Jensen hasn't been the same ever since. He blames himself, and his parents...Jensen thinks his parents would have rather

he perished in Josh's stead."

Jared inhales sharply, "What?"

"It's not true of course, but Jensen...he sees what he wants to. I'm sure you know how stubborn he can be."

Jared watches Jensen as he speaks to a group of people, expression open and yet somehow guarded all at once. " Could you.... Do you mind telling me about Jensen; before?"

"How much time do you have?"

Knowing that Jensen cares nothing for his whereabouts and the rest of the guests feels the same , Jared follows David further into the garden's maze. "All afternoon."

22.

"My mother thinks it's best to hold our celebration ball in a weeks time." Jensen remarks as he selects a pressed white shirt from the wardrobe. He takes off the dark blue, causing Jared to look away. The alpha's scent is enough to make him restless. "Our formal arrival into society as a mated couple."

At the dreaded announcement, trepidation rolls over Jared in waves. He can still remember the snickers he'd received when he'd spooned his soup incorrectly during lunch at the garden party. "But we just had the garden party..."

"That was informal." Jensen snaps giving Jared a look that says the answer should be obvious. "This is formal, as I said."

"Then what..." Jared wets his lips, distancing himself from Jensen as he does. His body is betraying him already. It's been a long time since they mated. "I'm not sure what to do at these things."

"It's not particularly hard." Jensen's hands still on the buttons of his shirt, clearly catching Jared's scent. His nostrils flare, lips going into a thin line and Jared holds his breath waiting to see what he'll do. " I have a hunt to get to, the butler is below stairs, see that the arrangements are made."

Jared not sure why he feels disappointed at the lack of action but he does. He remembers Jensen's promise of 'never again' and though he'd dismissed it at the time, he's starting to believe it. Jensen hasn't slept away from the estate since then.

"Then we're clear?"

"No, I don't know how to do any of that--"

"Don't be daft. It's so simple: menu, seating, invitations and all that. "

Before Jared can say anything in response, Jensen's gone.

23.

"I was surprised to receive your calling card, Jared." David smiles as he seats himself opposite Jared in the parlor. "It's good to see you again."

"You have a lovely home." Jared puts down the steaming tea cup, he's not sure how to initiate these things.

David laughs, "No need to be so formal; I hope you know you can speak freely with me."

Jared relaxes at the warmth in his tone. For the past few weeks, he's seen Lord Giuntoli at several of the events Jensen grudgingly dragged him to. While the others were standoffish and mocking to him, David has been kind and understanding. He's the only one who took the time to speak to Jared, to befriend him. Not even Jensen asks him about his country or prior life, but David has, warm eyes never showing reproach. Jared's so grateful to have him as a friend.

"Jensen informed me this morning that we're hosting a ball."

"That's not unusual."

"He's left me to make all the arrangements."

"Ah," Understanding dawns, "I take it you had no such need for grand balls in

Delshire.”

“I have no idea how to begin, and I can’t ask Donna.”

“And Jensen didn’t offer aid?”

Jared shakes his head, eyes dropping to his dove breeches. “I was wondering...if you knew...”

“Jared, I’ve hosted several balls in my time,” He winks, “I’ve four sisters, all married. I’d be glad to help you.”

“Really?”

“Yes, first things first: invitations.”

“But what about menu and--”

“None of that, no one will accept an invitation with only days in advance. It’s bad form.” David explains, “Fall is near, and apparently, Mrs. Jonas at the stationery swears the colors to have are gold, orange and rose.”

Jared feels flustered but already more confident, “Then rose, gold and orange they shall be.”

“See, we’re making headway already.”

“You may have spoken too soon.” Jared has saved the most embarrassing request for last, “I was w-wondering...would you teach me how to dance?”

24.

That night, Jared watches Jensen as he settles onto his back, eyes closing. The bed is big enough that they’re not touching and soon Jensen’s breathing evens out, signaling sleep. Jared doesn’t share the same comfort, he spends most of the night awake, too aware of Jensen’s scent and body heat. As shameful as it is, he wants to rub against him, take him in his mouth like he had done before. It’s more than his impending heat; Jared wants that closeness, but he wants to be the only one.

Before dawn, Jared gives up on sleep and slips out of bed. The house is still dark, Jeffrey is has not even awoken. The only place Jared has found a measure of peace is the library. Amongst the books, he can lose himself and escape. Grabbing his favorite tale, Jared curls up on the leather armchair, getting lost in the story.

"This is where you snuck off to? My library? "

The book drops out of Jared's hands, landing on the oriental rug with a muffled thud. Jensen is in front of the door scowling, wearing only hastily thrown on breeches, chest bare.

Jared blushes. "Sorry."

"This is the fourth night you came here." Jensen walks over. "What exactly do you find so interesting?" Jensen lifts the book from his hands before Jared can snatch it back. "Auricles and Tristan." He reads the title, brow raised. "So you like fairytales?"

"N-no." Jared stammers. "It's more than that." He hopes that Jensen doesn't press further because there's no way Jared can explain that the lure of the mythology is found not within the history but the love story of the two Weres who created a whole race. He'd wanted a love like that, something all consuming.

"Two alphas who did the impossible." Jensen muses. "It's the first story my parents told me."

"It's a beautiful tale." One Jared imagined he would tell his own cubs one day.

"We're taught as children that without loyalty, a pack dies; without love a Were is lost." The harsh lines of Jensen's face dissolve as he speaks. He looks much younger. "Joshua believed that, and because he could do no wrong, I believed it as well. It was his favorite legend too; Auricles and Tristan."

"Joshua was your older brother?"

The softness disappears and Jared regrets speaking.

“Yes, he was; had he not passed you would’ve been mated to him. I think you would’ve been happier with him.”

“What was he like?”

“He was the romantic, the dashing gentlemen. I think he truly wanted to be Auricles.” Jensen chuckles, eyes taking on a far away look. “I could talk to him for hours, about anything and nothing all at once.”

“You were like that,” There’s an ache in Jared’s chest, he can feel the sadness coming Jensen in waves. It makes him want to offer comfort, do anything to ease the suffering of his mate. “When we were in Seclusion I thought you romantic and dashing.”

“Really?” A sardonic smile, “And now?”

“I try not to think of you at all.” At the words, Jensen goes pale and Jared continues. “I do want to.... I want to know why you treated me like that.”

They both know what Jared’s referring to.

Jensen runs a hand through his hair tiredly, “Jared, I don’t know what you want me to say; I’m a fuck up. I always have been, always will be.”

The words hit deep and for some reason Jared can feel tears well up. “I’ll...I’m going to go.”

25.

It’s ironic that now that Jensen has no desire to carry on affairs, Jared won’t look at him. No one else can satisfy him like Jared. Too late he’d realized it was more than just a physical connection. Jensen felt the closest to peace when Jared slept curled around him, cheek pressed to his chest. He remembers their talks during Seclusion, misses them.

Jensen had tried to reconcile, he did, but every attempt had been rebuffed. Tonight, when the last dishes are cleared away, after another stilted dinner, Jensen goes into the parlor, pours himself a finger of whiskey.

“Smooth blend?”

Jensen swallows the fiery liquid in one go, “It’s passable.”

Alan sits down in the armchair closet to the fire. “Pour me one, would you.”

Suppressing a retort, Jensen does as he’s asked before sitting opposite him. They drink in silence, Jensen watching the wood crackle.

“Anything on your mind?”

His father’s question is expected, if a little late.

“I’m perfectly fine, father.” Jensen sets the glass down, itching with the feeling of being trapped. “Better than, actually, may even go down to *Whites*, and play a few rounds.”

Alan frowns, “I don’t think that will help with your marital troubles.”

“There are no troubles.”

“His father makes a noncommittal sound in response, “In the earliest years of our mating, your mother packed up Josh and spent more than six months at her father’s Northern estate.”

Jensen looks at him in surprise, “*Mother* did?”

Alan nods, shame faced. “And I was the stubborn idiot who let her.”

It’s not every day that Jensen hears sordid family stories, his mother closely guards even the smallest arguments. “What’d you do?”

“Took up with a floozy on a lads night out.”

Jensen’s smile slips off, he can see where this is going. “If this is--”

“I was using drink and women to fight a life I felt was not my own; it nearly destroyed us.”

“I’m not you.”

“Then why are you back to your old tricks? Everyone is talking Jensen, and if I heard it, your mate heard it. Have you no care for his feelings?”

“I knew this would turn into some way to insult me. Go ahead, list all my faults.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do, Jensen!”

“Spare me, Father. Go on, say it.”

“I have tried, Jensen, but I’m completely at a loss.” Alan looks at him in complete shock, mouth hanging open. “Joshua died eight years ago, we all suffered. I know you two were close, that you were there when it happened, but enough is enough. It wasn’t your fault.”

The words are lies, not because his father means them to be, but because he wasn’t there. Jensen knows with brutal certainty that his actions, fueled by childish stupidity and opiates caused Joshua to go after him that day. Were it not for him, Joshua would be here, sitting in the empty chair at his father’s side, laughing.

26.

“I can finally return to Delshire with peace of mind.” Jared’s mother beams up at him. She looks several years younger tonight, a true lady wrapped in rose silk, hair pinned and twisted with a cascade of inky black curls. “As they say in the city: you have finally arrived.”

“Look who’s suddenly the posh lady.” Jared grins, hand over hers. The thought of her immanent departure makes him feel despondent. “I have not arrived; I’ve merely thrown a passable party.”

“More than passable, everything looks superb,” Donna arrives on his left, “I’m very proud of you, I couldn’t have done a better job myself.”

“Thank you.” Jared smiles genuinely, watching the guests. He’s pleased and

surprised at how well everything has gone.

With David's help, Jared's been able to plan a beautiful ball. The floral arrangements, rose gold and white are gorgeously arranged, fragrant. They are the perfect compliment to the silk table cloths and gleaming crystal. The crystal are Ackles heirlooms.

"I had a little help." Jared admits when he spots David walking towards them.

"Don't be so modest." David waves away any thanks, "This was all Jared's doing."

Not so, Jared owes David many thanks, especially for the impromptu dance lessons. Without his patient instruction, Jared would've surely fallen flat on his face when Jensen led him unto the ballroom floor. As it is, he'd barely managed to make it through the traditional Viennese waltz.

"Then very well done." Alan says, nodding at David. "People will be talking about this ball for weeks."

"And the main course, the way you had the food prepared, it's like nothing I've ever tasted."

"The Delshire way." Jared had been unsure of whether or not to include them, but in the end he'd followed his instincts and tastes. "I grew up on them."

"Very interesting," Alan muses, "Not for every day, of course, but exotic for an evening."

"And you look very exotic as well." Jensen materializes behind him from nowhere. As usual, Jensen looks impeccable in his evening wear, the dark green setting off his eyes brilliantly. "Positively sinful."

Jared looks down at his black dress pants and jacket, he's dressed like nearly every man in the room, a task which he's most proud of. "I doubt that."

"There's no need to be modest, love." Jensen slides a hand around his waist in a possessive display that's completely out of character before he fixes David with a beguiling smile, "We make a striking pair, don't we?"

Looking uncomfortable, David replies, “You do.”

“Who knows, maybe we’ll have a couple of striking cubs soon?” Jensen’s false laughter makes Jared feel faint,. He hasn’t allowed himself to even consider the possibility that he may be pregnant. “If not, it won’t be for lack of trying.”

“Jensen!” Donna and Jared say at the same time, shocked at the forward conversation.

“Oh, don’t be so stiff all of you.” Jensen laughs once more, fingers slipping down to tap Jared’s bottom before he strides away, calling out to friends.

David breaks the awkward silence that descends after Jensen’s scene. Jared wishes he could follow suit, but instead of the giggling group o f women, he’d run until he reached the safety of his home.

“The high alpha’s son is here.” Alan grabs his elbow, steers his gaze to a young man standing in the midst of a large group. He’s tall, lithe, hair glossy and dark like a raven’s wing, a striking contrast to his bright blue eyes. “His name is Matthew.”

“You should greet him, speak with him properly.” David encourages as well, “He won’t be like the others.”

“Will you introduce me?”

“I would...I uh, just. I think it’s better you approach him on your own.”

The odd tone of David’s voice makes Jared look at him and he’s surprised to find the man flushed. Before Jared can inquire however, Alan is giving him a none too subtle push forward. Jared crosses the edge of the ballroom floor but before he can reach when Joanna steps into his path.

“Jared!” Cold blue eyes sweep over him assessing, “Hello, I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Lady Joanna.”

She looks pleased to be known, long lashes fluttering over her rouged cheeks. “Has my reputation preceded me?”

“I believe so.”

“I’m having such a wonderful time.” Joanna coos, ignoring his discomfort. “I must say I’m pleasantly surprised.”

“T-thank you.” Jared replies despite knowing her praise is put on. “I’m going to go--”

“My husband simply can not stop speaking of the spice rub on the lamb, you’ll have to have your cook send my staff the recipe. I insist.”

“It’s nothing particularly special, j-just some herbs,” Jared fidgets, catching Jensen looking at them from across the room. He looks worried, but he’s speaking with the high Alpha and can’t walk off. “From home, Mama oversaw the food preparation.”

“You address your mother as ‘Mama,’ how... quaint! Does everyone do so in the country? Only children speak like that here. You know, the countryside must be very refreshing.” Every word is insincere, “The closest I came to Delshire was a short ride into the forest, with, hmmm.” She pauses before her eyes light up, “Why, I believe it was your mate that took me. Lovely time that was, I especially enjoyed the fields, how soft a bed of grass and cloves can be.”

Jared’s stomach drops, he can feel the color leaving his face. “I...”

Joanna giggles, red lips stretched wide, “I’ll have to have Jensen take me again, it was such a grand time.”

“He *won’t*.” Jared finds his voice just as Jensen begins to make his way to them, “I know he wouldn’t.”

“He *will*.” With one last look, Joanna flounces off.

27.

Jared lays awake in the darkness, listening to Jensen fumble about and curse

lowly as he trips over his own feet. He's drunk, again, and Jared just feels tired.

The bed dips and Jensen yanks the sheets up around him with a yawn.

"Jared."

Forcing his breathing to remain steady, Jared feigns sleep.

"Love?" A hand inches down Jared's chest, fingers dipping into the open laces of his nightshift.

When Jared fails to respond, Jensen groans loudly, huffs and rolls away.

28.

Jensen's not sure what he's done to anger Jared once more to the point of silence. That bitch Joanna had probably let something slip, most likely on purpose. Regardless, Jensen doesn't owe the omega anything now, especially not fidelity. He's no longer the subject of gossip, Jared is. Jensen's heard just how friendly his mate has been with the David, several of his peers had been more than happy to inform him of what they'd seen.

Whites is half filled, boasting some of the most powerful alphas in society, but Jensen is looking for just one in particular. When he sees the asshole, Jensen pushes his way to the back of the room, sitting down on the empty chair across from David, whose playing a game of chess alone.

"Hello, old friend."

"Jensen," David looks up, surprise coloring his handsome features. "I'd hoped you'd remain indoors."

"And why is that?"

"I assumed you would be recovering from the other night's festivities."

"Well, here I am."

"Here you are."

Without asking, Jensen begins to rearrange the chess pieces, beginning the game anew and ruining the one David had started. “Are you up for a challenge?”

David’s watching him warily, “I always thrashed you in school.”

“That was before, many things have changed.”

“Alright, then.”

They play in silence for several minutes. Jensen is thrilled to see that his skill matches David’s. With every move, Jensen’s anger steadily builds. He had planned to be rational, to approach David in a civilized manner about what Joanna’s servant had seen. However, every tactile move David makes draws Jensen’s attentions to his fingers, forces him to think of those hands on his mate. Lady Joanna had said Jared had been at David’s unescorted, the pair closely entwined in the gardens.

“Jared seems rather quiet as of late.”

At David’s words, Jensen tenuous control snaps, “Jared always quiet.”

“Is everything alright?”

“That’s *none* of your concern.” Jensen glares, recalling the hushed tones of Jared and David during the garden party. “You’ve overstepped.”

“I’m simply concerned--”

“Jared is *my* mate, you shouldn’t be concerning yourself with him at all. Whatever it is you’re up to, I want it to cease *immediately* or I’ll have your bloody head on a pike.”

“What’s this?” Instead of fear, David laughs. “Are you jealous?”

“Stay away from him.”

“I’m offering him friendship, nothing more.”

“I know your kind of friendship.”

“Not all of us are like you, Jensen, I can keep it in the pants. It’s rich that your burning with the thought of Jared showing interest in any man, while you yourself trapeze about the city with whores. Jared should get some of his own--”

Unthinking, Jensen lunges across the board and tackles the other alpha to the floor.

They struggle, each fighting for dominance as the crowd gives way and then forms about them to watch. Jensen finds himself with the upper hand, and he punches David’s smug face as hard as he can. His victory is short lived, however, as David throws him backwards, and he lands on his back with enough force to knock the wind out of him. Before he can get his bearings, David’s landed two solid blows to his chest and then chin, signet ring breaking the skin.

The scent of his own blood, mixed with his raging jealousy, brings Jensen to a frenzy and he loses track of all his actions. The next thing he knows, his hands are being pried away from David’s neck, whose face is alarmingly blue. The other man begins to cough, color flooding his cheeks. David’s right eye is rapidly swelling, and the men watching look shocked.

Someone offers a hand to him and Jensen nearly loses control, feels a shift distorting his features. He’s never been this close to losing it.

David is staring at him with something akin to shock “Jensen--”

“Stay away, David. I mean it.”

29.

Jared’s on the settee, penning a letter to his mother who’s only just departed that morning when Jensen stalks into the room, mouth tight and anger evident in his eyes. There’s a large bruise over his stubbled chin, dried blood on his face and neck.

Immediately, Jared gets to his feet and rushes over, touching Jensen’s face with concerned hands. “What happened? Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“Don’t say another word,” Jensen growls, hand gripping tight over his. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“W-what?”

“Did you think I would let you humiliate me? That I wouldn’t find out?”

Jared blinks at Jensen in shock, he has no idea what he’s done this time to earn Jensen’s censure. Lately, it’s always something: using the wrong cutlery, wearing scuffed boots, his complete lack of knowledge on the classics of literature everyone keeps discussing.

Eyes widening when Jensen jerks off his coat, Jared tries to pull away, “I didn’t do anything.”

“I’m not sure how things work in Delshire, but a mated omega doesn’t meet with alphas in secret,” Jensen’s lip curls back in a snarl, eyes flashing dangerously. “Yes, I know all about your private chats with Lord Giuntoli.”

Panic makes him go hot and then cold, “I only--”

“Shut up,” Jensen drags Jared with a punishing grip, tossing him upon the bed. “You need to be reminded that you’re mine, maybe it’s my fault for neglecting you for so long.”

“You’re jealous?” Jared’s incredulous, “I’ve done nothing to earn your distrust! Unlike you, I have kept my vows from the day they were spoken.”

“Jealous? Of what? I can’t be jealous of my possession. You are mine; you spread those legs for me and me alone.”

At the words, Jared’s body goes rigid, but not entirely with fury. He hates the power Jensen has over him, the way his scent makes him dizzy with desire and want. But that doesn’t mean he’s going to accept this treatment, allow Jensen to speak to him as if he’s nothing but a whore when he’s his husband.

“Get away from me.”

“You think to deny me?” Jensen stalks his movements, eyes smoldering green.

“Your mouth says no but your body,” He trails a finger down Jared’s chest and the younger man shivers involuntarily, “You want me to fuck you, have you hanging off my knot and coming so hard you see stars.”

“No.”

Jensen leans down, breath hot over Jared’s tingling lips. “Liar.”

Jared wets his lips, a hand falling to palm his crotch. “I’m your husband., and yet you treat me like this.”

“Like what?”

A blush of shame darkens Jared’s cheeks. “I’m not a possession, and I wish--”

“Stop talking, ” Jensen slams his mouth down over Jared’s, kiss bruising and fiery in a way Jared can’t help but respond to even as he hates himself.

After a few moments Jared abandons all pretense of resistance, fingers curling in Jensen’s blond hair. When Jensen’s tongue slips into his mouth, Jared moans and Jensen gives a dirty chuckle, his hand deftly undoing the front clasp of Jared’s pants to slip inside.

“I love how you taste, like fucking sugar and cinnamon all the time, get lost in you.” Jensen presses further down, squeezes Jared’s swollen cock before his fingers trail down to between his legs to rub at his wet hole. He opens to the press of his finger easily. “Look at that, you’re clenching around me, so fucking tight for me. You want me, don’t you? Say yes. ”

“Y-yes.” Jared ducks his head with defeat, and opens his legs. His wider stance allows Jensen easy access to fondle him, to jerk down his breeches to his knees. Jensen kisses him once hard and then moves down the bed.

Jared cries out when Jensen pulls his ass cheeks apart and thrusts his tongue into his puckered hole, licking and sucking at his slick like a starving man. Jared’s a blubbery mess by the time Jensen pulls back, he’s wet and open, his entrance clenching on air with want. Jensen slides back up to suck on his neck, stubble rasping the sensitive skin.

“You’re mine.” The words are said against Jared’s lips, hot and possessive as Jensen presses his fingers into Jared slowly. “Admit it.”

When Jared doesn’t respond, Jensen pulls his fingers free.

“Jensen, don’t, please”

“Say it.”

Squeezing his eyes shut, Jared opens his mouth. “I’m yours.”

“Don’t ever forget it.” Jensen manhandles Jared unto his hands and knees. “Don’t ever think about another man.”

The wet head of his cock nudges against Jared’s pink hole and a muted cry flies past his lips when Jensen slams into him in one hot, hard thrust. He’s thrusting in and out of Jared, bare skin on bare skin, knot swelling and catching on the rim of his hole on every stroke.

Mindless, Jared whimpers and Jensen responds by driving in deeper, pounding into him like a man possessed, hitting Jared’s prostate with brutal accuracy. When Jensen’s knot slips in for the final time and they’re tied together, Jared loses it, pushing his ass back against Jensen to meet him the slow grind of his hips as he comes with Jensen emptying inside of him.

30.

It’s three weeks after the night Jensen fucked him like a whore, and Jared doesn’t know when he’s decided to leave but here he is, saddlebags packed and through the city walls at dawn. He’s so tired of feeling like shit, alone and hurt. What was once something treasured is degrading, even worse is Jared’s complete lack of self control. He can’t say no, and each time, when it’s over, Jensen spilling his seed inside of him, Jared wants to cry.

This isn’t what he wants, and Jared may not have known his father but he knows that if his father is anything like the man his mother says he is, he would’ve wanted Jared to be happy.

And he’s not; happy, that is.

Jared's so miserable it aches. Everyone hates him here, his husband, the people...he can't take it anymore. No matter how hard he tries, he'll never fit in and he's done trying. What's the use anyway? Even if Jensen felt anything for him, it's too late. Jared been hurt too many times.

After Jensen leaves in the morning, Jared saddles a horse and tells Alan he's going for a ride. It takes less than twenty minutes to lose his escort, and the moment Jared is sure he has, he runs.

And he doesn't stop running; keeps going at a hard pace for two weeks, stopping only for food and sleep.

His mother takes one look at him when he arrives and holds out her arms, draws him into a tight hug and doesn't say a word while he cries.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Same warnings, unbetaed so point it out or skip if that turns you off :)

And I'm done! Whoop, whoop! This got incredibly sappy at the end and i just didn't even fight it.

31.

As soon as Jensen returns to the estate he knows. The servants are running up and down the foyer trying to respond to the numerous shouted demands being given by his father. Alan is calling for a mounted search while his mother tries her best to look distressed. Sweat prickles at Jensen's brow, he wants to scream but he can't seem to find his voice. Numb, Jensen walks past the chaos and the concerned looks from the servants who are already gossiping behind their hands.

Inside their bedchamber everything is just as he left it: the bed neatly made, a pitcher of water on the vanity beside the ivory comb and brush, straight razor and rosewater. Jared's royal blue robe is still folded atop the window seat but the differences are stark. Every personal item of Jared's has disappeared. The book of fables is gone from the tabletop, the spot that once held Jared's leather hair bands, is vacant. The wardrobe holds only the luxurious clothes, coats and furs Jensen has gifted him with. The coarse wool fabric from Jared's native lands, clothes that Jensen had demanded be kept out of sight, are the only clothes taken.

It would seem a choice has been made. Jared would rather face the poverty of his former life than remain with him, regardless of the comforts Jensen's home holds.

“Jensen!” The doors of the bed chamber burst open, rocking on its hinges. Alan rushes inside, “There you are! The men are about to leave before they lose what little daylight is left. Get dressed--”

“Dismiss the search.”

“Are you mad?” Alan stops in front of him, eyebrows raised. “I’ll do no such thing! Jared may have been kidnapped or worse! He left for a ride this morning and never returned--”

“Jared is not missing, or kidnapped, nor is he in trouble.” Jensen is proud that his voice is calm and level. “All of his belongings are gone; he left me.”

Green eyes, so like Jensen’s own, sweep over him, going from compassionate to resolute. Alan has understood the reprehensible truth; Jensen is the cause of this. He has driven his mate away. “That changes nothing, Jensen. Pride be damned, Jared is your mate and husband, you must go after him.”

“No, I don’t.” Jensen thinks of that morning: the sweep of Jared’s dark lashes and the rose blush of his cheeks as he slept. The image evokes an ache deep in his chest, the pain far too similar to what he felt while standing above Joshua’s grave. “Jared has made his choice.”

After his father's death, Jared stopped speaking. At two, he'd only just begun forming words but when Gerald was lowered into the ground, he'd ceased to say anything at all. He'd had been silent for nearly a year, withdrawing deeper and deeper into himself as his mother's panic increased. There was nothing physically wrong with him, doctors had confirmed that, but no matter how his Mama had tried, no words could be coaxed from him.

According to his mother, everything changed when the Murrays arrived from the South. Mrs. Murray's boy Chad, a blond omega filled with hyper active energy, was only a month younger than Jared. He'd marched right up to Jared talking a mile a minute before Sharon could explain her boy's infirmities. Jared had shocked them all when he returned Chad's hello with one of his on. From that day, the boys had been inseparable. There's never been anyone that offers the support and love that Chad does and that hasn't changed in fifteen years.

Currently, Jared and Chad are in the Murray barn, seated atop a stack of hay as they eat a lunch of cold ham, goat cheese and bread. Chad hasn't questioned him about his return and Jared's thankful for the silence. He always knows the right words to say, even when they aren't words at all. He's not ready to speak of Jensen; it hurts too much.

"I'd just like to say," Chad's tone is far too serious and Jared tenses. "I'm here for you."

"I know." Jared relaxes, leaning against Chad's shoulder appreciatively. He smells like mud and sweat, not unlike Jared himself. "I'd never doubt it."

"Just a friendly reminder." Chad beams and then jumps to his feet. "Back to work."

Jared watches Chad grab a stack by the strings, one hand on each, hefting the weight with his legs before tossing it over to the growing pile at the foot of the ladder.

“Well?” Chad cocks a hip suggestively, after several minutes. Sweat is pouring down his back, soaking his shirt; stacking hay is no easy task. “Are you just going to stare at my hot ass, or are you going to help?”

Jared hoots, “You know you’re irresistible.”

“Stop trying to butter me up,” Chad winks saucily over his shoulder, “And get those soft city hands to work.”

33.

In the past years, Jensen’s name has frequently been on the tongue of coy debutantes, disturbed mothers, outraged father’s and generally all of society. People enjoy talking about his antics, and for years, Jensen didn’t care. In fact he’d embraced it. There was a reason behind every wild party and orgy Jensen hosted. Every look of disappointment his parents gave him afterwards fed the need he had to punish himself; reminded him that he shouldn’t have been the one to return unscathed.

Those disappointed looks have since blossomed into antagonistic family meetings. This particular gathering is going wonderfully; Donna has taken the occasion to bellow down from on high, point out all of his deficiencies and

failings. Jensen has ceased listening to her tirade, focusing his attention instead on the glass doors of the liquor cabinet and counting down the seconds to self-medication.

“Joshua would be revolted to see how you have dragged the family name through the mud! Your own mate has forsaken you, disgraced not only you but us! And your father is mortified!” Donna inhales an angry breath, chest heaving as she looks to Alan for aid. When his father is silent she becomes furious. “Your *irresponsibility*, your *senselessness*, your *stupidity*, has caused us *enough* misery, Jensen! When will enough, be enough?!”

Donna has slipped wholly away from the disgrace of his mate leaving, and has careened straight into the past. Everything always comes back to Joshua. His father looks pained, as if he believes the diatribe to be too harsh.

But it’s not enough; it will never be enough. Jensen knows the truth, knows he deserves every word, and deserves the hate his mother is trying to hide. The hate she’s been trying to hide for *eight fucking years*. Jensen needs his father to know that he doesn’t deserve consideration, that his mother is correct.

“Due to your idiotic--”

“Opiates, mother, not just idiocy.” The admission alleviates as much as it destroys him. The shame Jensen has felt for years, the guilt he’s carried on his back; it’s finally laid bare. “You thought Joshua died for a noble cause but it was for naught.”

Donna goes deathly still, “What are you saying?”

“I was under the influence of opiates, reckless,” Jensen forces the words out. “I stole a mount from the high Alpha’s stable.”

“Stealing from the Alpha is an offense punishable by death!” Alan rasps. “Were you out of your mind?”

Fighting the hysteria welling inside, Jensen continues, “Joshua found out about what I had done, he thought to return the horse before the stable hands were any wiser. I r-refused,” Jensen chokes, “I told him if he wanted the mount he’d have to take it from me. I took off at a gallop and Joshua gave pursuit. I knew the paths well, Joshua did not. I only meant to have bit of fun, I never thought...”

“You lied.” Donna’s eyes are blank, leaking tears that fall down her cheeks in rivulets. “You *led* him into the forest.”

“I swear I didn’t know he’d be unseated! I didn’t mean to --”

“You didn’t *know*? You didn’t *mean*? Do you think that matters?” Donna screeches, hands balling up at her sides. Her thin frame is shuddering as she glowers in accusation. “You caused him to follow you! You caused his death!”

“Donna,” Alan intervenes but she’s beyond listening, “Try and--”

“Try and what?” The hatred is there, stark and naked at the surface. Finally. “Try and ignore that Jensen has been trouble from the moment he was born? We

never should have had another child, we never should have.” She begins to weep; hands beating at Alan’s restraining arms. “He killed my boy, Alan, he killed our boy!”

The words destroy Jensen, stay with him long after he flees the room and manor.

34.

Jensen cradles the heavy glass decanter of brandy to his chest, dropping low in the booth. He’s declined all invitations of company, especially the nauseatingly sweet one of Lady Joanna’s. There’s not enough liquor in the city to erase the words that continue to ring through his head. Jensen’s terrified. It was one thing to suspect how his mother felt, but knowing is unbearable.

“May I have a seat?”

Jensen blinks, scowling at the man standing above him. “David, you bastard, are you looking to get your ass kicked again?”

“I’m looking to be your friend.” David’s mouth twists in a rueful smile, “We should’ve never come to blows. I shouldn’t have antagonized you.”

Jensen snorts, uncapping the bottle and pouring himself another glass. “Why are you saying any of this?”

“We were close at university; I like to think that we never stopped being friends.” At Jensen’s silence, David sits down, “I know what you’re thinking, Jensen, I’ve been aware of it for quite some time. I had hoped with your mate that you would find some measure of peace, but it appears you’ve chased him off.”

Not even bother with a glass, Jensen takes a long swallow from the bottle, wincing through the burn, “I expected Jared to leave.”

“You can’t blame him.”

“I blame myself.”

“That’s your go to for everything.” Davis stops him when he tries to take another drink, “Listen to me, Jensen, you may be to blame for the way you treated your mate, for the way you’ve acted these past years, but you’re not to blame for his death.”

Jensen shakes off David’s hand, closing his eyes. He regrets it because the moment he does he sees their faces, his mother’s filled with revulsion and his father’s incredulous. “Go to hell, David.”

“I was there, Jensen, the day he died. It was an *accident*; nobody caused it. Joshua would’ve done anything and everything to protect you, no matter the circumstances that brought you to peril.” There’s sincerity in his words that Jensen desperately needs. “He would speak of you, constantly, you know. My brother would make fun and tell me how annoying y it was. He found it humorous, said Joshua was prouder than any father ever was, he’d go on and on

about your business acumen and sharp mind. But he worried about the way you lived, the darker entertainments you were seduced by abroad.”

“I would take it all back,” Jensen fights not to cry, not here with several patrons watching in interest. He bows his head, hiding his face. “If I could, I would.”

“Jensen,” David lowers his cheek to the table as well to meet his eyes, “Joshua would want you to be happy, to live up to your potential. What he wouldn’t want is this. You’ve been here for three days, wallowing in liquor and filth. Joshua would kick your ass two ways to Sunday. ”

Jensen opens his mouth to tell David to fuck off, get away, anything...but the words don’t come.

David pries the brandy from Jensen’s hand “You’ve got to get yourself together.”

“I just,” Jensen swallows, horrified to feel the dam break. He can’t control the tremors that wrack him, the loneliness that splits him asunder. “I miss him...so much.”

“I know you do, we all do, and that’s normal.”

“I wish I could take it all back, the drugs, the stealing--”

“As much as you want to, you can’t.” David looks at him seriously, “If you live

every second of your life feeling guilty, you won't be living at all."

The pain is still there, but it diminishes. As much as Jensen has fought it, he knows it's true. Jensen's every memory of Joshua, from the time he was a boy to the last moment he'd laid eyes upon him, paints Josh as understanding.

At five, Joshua had been his brave knight who checked under his bed for monsters and still let Jensen sleep with him when he was too afraid to return to his own chambers.

At twelve, Joshua had been his loudest supporter, cheering him on from the stands during his fencing bouts.

At twenty, Joshua had been his protector, had set after him, dark blond hair catching the sun as he was suspended midair before he crashed to the earth, neck snapping beneath his frightened mounts hooves.

"You have a good life, Jensen, as much as you've tried to ruin it. Your family name is powerful enough that society will forget your indiscretions. You're young still, and you have a mate who cares for you deeply."

Fatigue weighs down on Jensen heavily. He wants to let go, he tries to let go. "It's too late."

"Jared loves you."

Jensen recalls the despicable manner in which he treated Jared. He'd taken him like a stranger, reduced their mating to sex. Whatever feelings Jared may have had for him, Jensen has killed. "I doubt that."

"Jensen." David makes a sound of frustration, "You can never see past your own nose. Jared does love you. In fact, the only reason we were spending so much time together was because of you."

"Perhaps you're misinterpreting his feelings for you."

"Your jealousy is flattering but misplaced." Exasperated, David motions a server over to the table and when the man arrives, hands him the brandy and scotch Jensen has. Before Jensen can protest David speaks again. "Jared didn't want to shame you. He's new to all of this: the city, the people and etiquette. I was little more than a teacher, honestly."

"But the garden, Joanna's servant said--"

"I taught him the Viennese waltz." David smirks softly, "Rather well if his performance was anything to go by. He only stepped on your toes twice."

This news makes Jensen feel inferior. "But he left me."

"I know that, everyone does."

David stares at him.

Jensen stares blankly back.

“Sober up, and go after him you, daft idiot!”

35.

Being in the manor again sets Jensen on edge. He doesn't want to linger, and hopes to avoid seeing both his mother and father. As it is, he's unsure of his course of action, but there's nothing else he can do, he wants to at least see Jared.

“Jensen, you've returned.”

Jensen doesn't stop packing when his father speaks, “It would appear so.”

“Going somewhere?”

The butler moves past Alan who's remained in the doorway Jensen's great cloak in hand. “As requested, my lord, I've taken the liberty of packing three more.”

Alan takes in the heavy fur lining, and the filled trunks with similar clothing.

“You’re off to Delshire.”

“Where else?”

“That’s...good.” Alan says in approval, “It’s taken you long enough.”

“It’s taken me quite some time to realize many things.” Jensen snaps the black trunk shut, “I owe you an apology father. I’ve behaved horrifically and heaped indignity upon our family name.”

Alan’s mouth opens and closes several times as he stammers. “There’s no need for that, Jensen. I should be apologizing to you. Your mother spoke out of turn. What happened was a tragic accident, and once she calmed down she realized that.”

Jensen smiles sadly, “There’s no need to lie.”

Alan averts his eyes, “I don’t blame you.”

“You’re far too easy on me, Father.”

“You’re my son.” Alan states as if that is the end all and be all. “I will always love you, Jensen, and I will always support you.”

“Thank you for saying that.”

“I wish you well,” After a brief hesitation, Alan pulls him into a tight hug. His father hasn’t embraced him in years. “Take Simon and William with you, along with the footmen” Alan’s stern look stops Jensen’s protests. “Send word when you arrive in Delshire.”

“I will,” Jensen promises but he doesn’t know if he means it. “Let us hope that Jared is as understanding as you.”

36.

“Off to bed already?”

Jared nods, yawning as he stretches. He tires easily as of late and Jared thinks it’s because he’d gotten used to city life. It must be the work load; he refuses to believe his lethargy has anything to do with Jensen. Denial sustains him even as he lays awake, remembering the curve of Jensen’s lips, the scent of his skin or the warmth of his hands.

“I...” Sharon falters, “We’re running low on supplies, flour and such. With the harvest being scarce, I was thinking that perhaps I’d return to work in the mines.”

“No.” Jared turns around to look at his mother. She’s nearing forty, stress and hard labor making her appears much older. “You can’t do that.”

“Jared, we need coin, winter is approaching.”

“I know,” Jared despises the darkness of the mines, the suffocating air that clouds his lungs. The mines are a harsh reality the town knows all too well. Several men have died when the walls of a site cave in. The manager of the mine could not care less about the mounting deaths. But it’s the only way to earn money. “I’ll go.”

“But Jared--”

“It’s my turn to take care of you, Mama.” Jared says firmly, “I’ll go.”

37.

Three weeks later Jensen finds himself deep into the countryside, in the midst of a small cluster of buildings. Upon his arrival, several doors have opened and he’s been greeted with numerous curious stares. The Weres are dressed plainly in homespun garments, unlike the bright colors favored by the court. They keep their distance but the children crowd around the carriage, run alongside it and try to keep pace.

Jensen calls down to a scruffy child of about ten. “Excuse me, do you know where I might find the Padalecki home?”

Instead of replying, the child gawks at him then giggles.

Jensen dismounts, instructing his footmen to wait as he goes over to the children. They at least appear friendlier than the adults.

“Do you have sweets?” A little girl of about five demands almost immediately; she’s without shoes, only in stockings, even though winter is nearly upon them. “Peppermint or toffee sticks?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t. Do you know where the Padalecki home is?”

“Or gold?” She considers him, touches the shiny buttons of his long coat in wonder. “Yeah, I betcha have lots gold!”

When it becomes apparent the small child is more interested in listing off all the things she’s positive Jensen has in his possession than actually helping him, Jensen tries his luck with the next, and then the next, finally a blonde man wanders up to him. He’s been standing with three men in front of what appears to be a general store.

“You must be Lord Ackles.” His name is an accusation. “What are you doing in Delshire?”

Taking in the distrust in the other man’s eyes, Jensen pastes on his most charismatic smile, “I don’t believe I’ve made your acquaintance.”

“Chad.” The man replies shortly, ignoring Jensen’s proffered hand, “And I’ll ask you again: why are you here?”

“That’s none of your concern.” Jensen frowns, not quite sure of what to make of the hostile lunatic. “Directions to the Padalecki manor would be appreciated.”

“I don’t know why you’ve come, but Jared doesn’t want to see you.” Chad lowers his voice, “So why don’t you turn around and head back the way you came.”

Jensen holds his challenging gaze, “I’m not leaving without speaking to him.” He raises his voice, so all can hear. “So if any of you know where the Padalecki-
_”

“Lord Ackles?!”

Sharon comes out of the general store, astonishment coloring her features.

“I did not...” Her hands go to her messy hair and then to her muddied skirts, “We were not expecting you.”

“Sharon, my lady,” Jensen steps around the belligerent blond, “It’s been far too long.”

The surprise gives way to suspicion, “You did not send word.”

“I departed without opportunity to. I wanted to speak with Jared.”

“I’m not...” Sharon darts an anxious glance at him, “I don’t think he would want that.”

“I won’t make Jared do anything he doesn’t want to.” Jensen vows, “I just want the chance to speak with him and apologize.”

“If he tells you to leave, you leave.”

“Of course.”

38.

The ride to the Padalecki homestead is a silent one. Sharon’s courteous but aloof. She answers his questions with monosyllabic responses of ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Even after Jensen swears to make things right by her son, she remains cold. The only thing she continues to say is that she won’t allow him to force Jared’s return.

When they start down the road to the cottage, Jensen sees Jared again for the first time in a month. He’s outside of the house, dressed in black breeches and a thick shirt, hanging laundry of patched bed linens and wool. Jared’s face is turned up to the sun, hair loose and shifting with the breeze. His lips are moving and Jensen realizes he’s *singing* as a smile plays at his lips. He questions how he ever took him for granted.

At the sound of the horses, Jared glances up at the road, and then instantly does a double take. By the time the foot men prepare them to dismount, Jared's smile is gone, his eyes flat and cold. Jensen forces himself not to run over to him. Instead, he offers a hand to help Sharon climb down from the carriage and walks with her to where Jared's waiting. His men, most likely confused as to the lack of housing for the horses, remain behind.

Sharon smiles tightly, "Look who arrived this morning, Jared; Lord Ackles."

Snubbing him, Jared takes his mother's hand and ushers her into the rundown little cottage, "There's tea and bread on the table."

After the door shuts behind her, Jared faces him. He looks as if he's preparing for battle, and all Jensen can focus on are the little moles on his cheek, the scent of him after being without for so long.

"Jensen, you can't--"

"Jared, I--"

They both speak at the same time and then stop.

An atypical blush creeps up Jensen's neck. Women say he has a silver tongue, and yet Jensen can't think of a single clever thing to say. "I was hoping to speak with you."

“Is this about a divorce?”

The offensive word hits Jensen like a blow. It’s socially unheard of to divorce in his circles, and those who have taken that route are social pariahs. “There will be no divorce!”

“Do as you wish.” Jared’s eyes drop from his, but his voice is firm. “I’m not returning to the city.”

“I’m not here to force you to return.”

“You’re not?” Jared looks dubious, tucking a fly away strand behind his ears. “Then why...?”

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and I.” Jensen’s never been over taken with nerves and fear like this. Seeing Jared again has pushed so many emotions to the surface. He has no idea why it’s so difficult to speak, perhaps because Jared matters so much. There’s nothing he wants more than Jared’s understanding, “I would like to explain my behavior. I expected to be matched when I turned thirty, my father didn’t adhere to that expectation and it made me angry. I was furious, behaved as a child, and I took my frustrations out on you, but now, I’d like to work on things, try and be a mate to you.”

“No, thank you.”

Jensen's taken aback, "No?"

"No; I don't want you." Jared lifts the woven basket with the remaining laundry over his shoulder. "You wasted your time coming here."

"You want me."

"I don't."

"You do." Panic makes Jensen revert to his old ways. He comes close behind Jared until his mouth is just a breath away from the fine hairs on the back of Jared's neck. In this way they've always been well matched. "I can smell how badly you want me."

"It's back to that, is it? Your bullshit apology didn't last more than a few minutes." Jared laughs harshly, and steps away. "I've never denied my attraction to you. I can't control my body, however, I can control my mind and heart, and neither wants you. I won't be your whore...not again."

"You were never...I never thought of you that way." The words physically hurt, and Jensen regrets ever having made Jared feel like he was anything but his mate. "Give me a chance."

"Why?" Jared turns on his heels to face him, eyes crackling with resentment. "Why bother? You don't want me Jensen, you never did! You should be relieved to have me gone. There's no one to embarrass you in front of your important

friends by not knowing French or the right fork to use.”

“That’s not true,” Jensen contradicts, “Let me prove that to you.”

“Just go away.” The fight leaves him and Jared just looks tired. “No matter what you say, I’ll never trust you again.”

“You will,” Jensen pledges, “And if you allow me to, I’ll remain for as long as it takes me to earn your trust.”

“You’re going to stay in Delshire?” Jared motions to the cottage, dirt and leaves, looks over to where his men are still staring at their surroundings aghast. “*You?*”

“Yes,” Jensen straightens to his full height. “I will.”

“Fine; you won’t last a week.”

39.

The cot Jensen has been given is made from straw and rags alone. He can feel the dirt packed floor beneath him, and has spent the entire night awake because he can smell mice. Not for the first time, Jensen regrets not seeking shelter at the inn with his servants but he’d seen the look in Jared’s eyes when he was shown to his bed. Jared had expected--*wanted* him-- to decline. So Jensen had gritted his teeth and gave thanks before undressing. The one small comfort Jensen has is that his threadbare pallet is situated close to the hearth, so he’s warm even if uncomfortable.

Dawn light is spilling through the soot lined window above the table when Jensen hears footsteps in the next room, and then voices. When the door opens, Jensen pretends to be asleep, watching Jared move about the kitchen as he makes tea. Jensen wrinkles his nose when Jared breaks off a chunk of the same stale bread from last night to eat.

Jared pauses only once, looking at Jensen before he shrugs into a worn brown cloak.

“Where are you going?”

“To work.”

Jensen sits straight up, casting his coarse blankets off. “What do you mean: work?”

“This may be a foreign concept to you, but some Weres labor for the coin they need to survive.”

“And where do you...labor?”

“My mother’s too old to work in the mines; I’ve taken her place.”

“The mines?” Jensen can’t believe what he’s hearing. “Are you insane?”

“What else is there?”

“*Farming!* My father said you come from--”

“We had a meager harvest. The mines are the alternative.”

“Absolutely not!” Jensen pulls him back inside, “No mate of mine will be scrounging around in dangerous soot filled caves.”

“We need the coin.”

Jensen scoffs, “My coffers are overflowing, anything you need I can provide.”

That apparently is the wrong thing to say, Jared bristles, “I won’t take a cent from you.”

“I have already apologized--”

“Words,” Jared wrenches his hand away, “Mere words that mean nothing from lips such as yours. You can’t buy me the same way you do your partners at *Whites*.”

Jensen tries to think of something, anything. “Then how about actions? I will take your place.”

40.

“You can’t go in there, my lord.” His footman looks absolutely scandalized. “Your father would have my head if he knew I stood by and allowed you to do something so imprudent. It’s certain death.”

Simon has obviously chosen to ignore the fact that several men have trudged inside since their arrival at the muddy site. The ones who emerge are covered in black soot and Jensen feels queasy at the thought of breaking rock and scrounging in the dirt like an animal for hours.

“Lord Ackles?”

A heavy set man rushes from the roughshod building that serves as an office. His face is red and his hair wild and jacket incorrectly buttoned.

“My lord, my apologies you cannot...I mean, allow me to introduce myself, I’m Liam Kelly b-but you ...I’m the manager for Lord Rothschild. I haven’t, there was no w-word--”

“I’m not here on inspection or anything so formal.”

Some of the redness seeps away as well as the wild nervous look in his eyes, “A social visit then?”

“I’ve come to work.”

“Where?”

“Here.”

Mr. Kelly looks at him vacantly, and then scans about as if he expects a new building to spring forth from the earth, “Yes, but where?”

“The *mines*.” Jensen extends his hands and Simon strips off his cloak, folding it neatly over his arm. He rolls up the sleeves of his pale blue lawn shirt. “I’ll just get started.”

“I c-can’t possibly--*a lord in the mines*?!” Mr. Kelly looks as if he’s about to have an apoplexy, “The mines are no place for one such as you.”

“And yet you allowed my husband to work in them.”

“Your *husband*? My lord, I had no idea--”

“Rest assured there are no ill feelings, and I’ll have no special treatment. I work and receive wages; same as the others.”

“If its work you insist upon, then there are, uh, I can have...”Mr. Kelly stammers as he scrambles, “You can balance the books!”

As luck would have it, Chad, the same snide gentlemen from yesterday happens upon them. He’s dressed in brown trousers, hole in the back of the knee and a knit sweater. “Balancing books? I’d like that job.”

Mr. Kelly’s expression morphs into disgust, “Get to work, Murray.”

Chad snorts, “I thought so.” He brushes past Jensen, “Lounging behind a desk while real men do the hard labor. I’ll be sure to let Jared know all about your first day.”

Jensen squares his shoulders, and as much as it pains him, declines Mr. Kelly’s offer. “I’ll be in the mines.”

41.

Jensen’s never known exhaustion such as this. Every muscle in his body feels as if it’s on fire, strung too tight. His shoulders and neck, forced into a bent position for hours as he had picked at rock are particularly tender. The men delight in watching him struggle, none offering aid. When he emerges at the end of the

work day, Simon lets out a squawk of horror before he composes himself. Simon was Jensen's manservant when he was an adolescent and it seems he's taking his renewed duties far too seriously. Jensen would laugh at his melodrama if it didn't hurt so much.

"I've had William fetch a hot towel." Simon cries, coming to Jensen's side as the carriage door opens. "And Joseph is purchasing dinner... if he can find anything decent in this town."

"Nonsense," Jensen rubs the back of his neck. "I'll take supper with my husband."

"Well, well...look who made it through the day," Chad slaps him on the back and Jensen wants to howl at the pain but he refuses to give the smug bastard the satisfaction. While Chad's face is also covered in dirt, he doesn't seem to be suffering the way Jensen is. "I thought our wee precious lord would be dead and gone by noon; you surprised us all by not dropping dead."

"Yes, well." Jensen smiles tightly, wiping at his face. "I'm full of them; surprises that is."

Chad's smile is not entirely without humor, "You're full of something."

42.

Jared picks at his dinner, staring at Jensen staring at him. It's unsettling; Jensen

is watching him with the same fascination a child watches an insect. It makes Jared feel on edge and as a consequence he's fumbling with his utensils and dropped his spoon twice.

"You should try the roast pheasant." Sharon breaks the awkward silence. She's been watching the two of them all evening; has been sneaking concerned looks his way since Jensen returned all but swaying on his feet from the mines. "It's delicious."

Jensen's footmen had purchased the meat from the butcher and then his mother had prepared it with rosemary potatoes and carrots, once again purchased by the footmen. It smells wonderful, and expensive. It's been weeks since Jared's eaten anything but dried beef and oatcakes but he refuses to accept anything Jensen paid for.

Stubbornly, Jared continues to eat his stew. "I'm fine." The dried meat in the broth was caught by his own hands, and although it's tough, it's filling.

"If you don't prefer pheasant, William said the butcher also has beef."

"I prefer exactly what I'm eating."

The silence uncomfortable silence descends once more until lightning cracks across the sky and thunder rolls making all of them jump in their seats.

"It didn't smell like rain earlier."

“Storms come quickly in Delshire.” Sharon replies.

Jared looks up at the ceiling and groans before going to the small stack of pots in the broom closet. He drags the largest cauldron out unto the middle of the floor, right where Jensen’s bed is meant to be.

Jensen watches him confused. “What are you...”

Before Jensen can finish the question, the rain begins to fall heavily, dripping down through the hole in the roof to pool in the bottom of the cauldron.

Jensen watches the leak in fascination. “Oh.”

Jared clenches his jaw, “Yes.”

“Where am I sleeping tonight?”

“I don’t suppose your footmen can procure a room--”

Jensen smiles beguilingly, “You suppose wrong.”

43.

Since Jared's childhood the sound of the rain always lulled him to sleep, but tonight he lays wide awake. The reason for his insomnia is next to him, snoring away. Due to the leak occupying Jensen's temporary bed space, Jared has had no choice but to share his bed with him. At least he knows Jensen won't try anything, Jared and his Mama share a room and she's but two short feet away, sleeping in her own cot.

Tonight, Jared had nearly felt concerned for Jensen when he staggered inside, coughing from the mines. It was only his own self-disgust that kept him from drawing a hot bath for Jensen. It's only been two days and Jared can feel his resolve weakening. It had been much easier to pretend he didn't care when he didn't have to see his mate daily. With Jensen's presence comes memories Jared has been working hard to forget.

Beside him, Jensen makes a small sound in his sleep, turning over unto his stomach and flinging his arm out to the side. Small as the bed is, one hand lands on Jared's stomach. Jared can't look away from Jensen's long fingers, the fine dusting of blond hairs at his knuckles. He's bombarded with images of the past, their bodies intertwined, heat sparking between them.

Gingerly, Jared reaches down to move Jensen's hand away. He stops when he sees a smudge of red. Jared turns Jensen's hand over and touches his palm, speechless. Even with the accelerated healing of a Were, there are blisters marring his skin, broken and bleeding. It must be painful for him to continue working in the mine, yet Jensen hasn't voiced complaint.

Thunder sounds once more and Jared closes his eyes. He doesn't let go of Jensen's hand.

44.

“Look!” Jensen thrusts the flowers into Jared’s hands. It had taken everything in Jensen not to run back to the cottage after spotting these on his lunch break. “Remember?”

“Blue Dahlias are fairly common here.”

“I know that, but.” Jensen flushes, “I meant, I remembered you liked them. So I picked a bouquet.”

Jared looks like he’s about to refuse. “Uhm...”

“I didn’t pay for it, they were free, so there’s no reason for you to refuse.”

“I guess not.” Jared leans in and smells the flowers. Jensen feels like a king. “They’re lovely.”

Not as lovely as you are. “You can put them in water, the way you did in the city.”

Jared gives a tiny smile, “Dinner is nearly ready.”

45.

Wincing at the sting from the popped blisters, Jensen unwraps the cloth bandages, cursing when the linen sticks to his torn skin. It's been days of breaking jagged rock and the discomfort hasn't lessened. But this is what he has to do; Jensen shudders to think of Jared in his place.

The water in the bowl is tinged pink with blood after he's finished washing his hands. Rolling his stiff shoulders, Jensen comes to a stop when he notices Sharon at the doorway, dark eyes watching him. She's holding a small jar in front of her.

"I didn't mean to disturb you; I thought you and Jared were out."

"It's alright, Jensen." Sharon grabs a clean rag and presses it against his broken calluses, drying the tiny wounds before spreading a thick salve over them. "I wanted to thank you."

"For what?" Remarkably, the salve has stopped the stinging. "I should thank you, my hands feel better already. Chad says the blisters will form callouses in a few weeks."

"I meant to thank you for the work you've been doing. Usually, the crop is enough to last the winter and we sell the surplus, but the lands not like it used to be."

“It’s nothing; if it wasn’t for my past actions you both would have more than enough..” Jensen smiles wearily, “I’m off to bed.”

“And I know Jared appreciates it as well.” With a knowing smile, Sharon pats him on the arm “There’s bread and cheese from supper on the table; eat before you go to bed.”

46.

“See?” Jensen calls down from the roof, “I can be useful.”

Jared looks up at him, one hand shading his eyes from the sun. “I wouldn’t say useful quite yet.”

It’s been nearly two weeks since Jensen arrived in Delshire, and each day brings a little more hope. Jared speaks to him now, more than just one word responses. They’re still no more than acquaintances but Jensen thinks he’s making progress.

Now, with his first wages, Jensen had purchased roofing tar and presented it to Jared proudly.

“I gathered the leaves.”

“Not nearly enough,” Jared chides, “*And* you didn’t patch the leak, which was your purpose.”

“I was just getting to that.” Jensen climbs down the ladder, wiping his soiled hands on his breeches. “How does one begin fixing a roof?”

“You mean you don’t know how? But you bought the tar and everything.” Jared’s words are light and teasing, and Jensen’s positive he and Chad have been laughing at him for the past hour. “Then what have you been doing up there?”

Jensen grins sheepishly, “I was trying to figure it out.”

“Need help?” This comes from Chad and Jensen is pleasantly surprised. “It’s just getting sad now.”

“Are you offering?”

Chad exchanges a look with Jared, “Looks like.”

“I’ll help, too.”

Whenever the moon is full, all Weres have the irresistible urge to shift, to feel the dirt beneath their paws, to run wild and unrestricted. Full moons have always been special to Jared, he looks forward to them. However, for the past two full moons, Jared hasn't shifted. Before, he'd blamed the lack of shifting on his mating bond weakening; a physically painful process that occurs when an omega leaves their Alpha. But now Jensen is here, and Jared still hasn't shifted.

Tonight, the full moon hangs heavy and low in the sky while Jared vomits, leaves crunching beneath his knees as he struggles to draw a breath.

There is but one other explanation.

Pregnancy.

The moment Chad said it, Jared had lost his dinner.

Omegas are incapable of shifting once they conceive.

Chad, shifted into a tawny wolf beside him, nuzzles his hand, fur thick and warm against his cold skin.

48.

This had seemed like a splendid idea at conception but now Jensen is not so sure. He'd expected his staff to know how to at least approach making a meal. He

regrets his magnanimous declaration of independence; he could use Sharon's help.

So far all Jensen has accomplished is boiling water, and that had been touch and go for several moments. Jensen wishes Jared's favorite food wasn't so difficult to prepare. Landing the wild boar had been hard enough, but Jensen had somehow managed to do so last full moon.

"How does one actually butcher a boar?"

Simon looks as clueless as Jensen feels, "I have no idea, my lord."

"William?"

"Sever the head." The man replies sagely, "That I'm sure of; no one serves the head."

"That's very helpful." Jensen says sarcastically.

Thankfully, the door opens and Sharon, who had been given strict instructions to keep Jared occupied, comes inside. She's carrying a package wrapped in burlap, and her cheeks are reddened with cold.

"Where's Jared?"

“The Murrays’ cow is foaling so Jared went to lend a hand.”

“On his birthday?”

“Well, it gives you time to...” She looks at the dead animal on the table. “Do whatever it is you’re doing.”

“I want to surprise him with dinner, but I don’t actually know where to begin with a wild boar.”

Sharon’s expression goes soft, “If you’d like, I can help.”

“That would be greatly appreciated.”

“Would you men move this outside?” Sharon asks Simon and William, “Butchering a pig is messy work.”

Simon looks green, “Of course.”

Jensen points to the box, “What is that?”

“This arrived for you at the post, from your father.”

Jensen wipes his hands on a rag, and takes the pocket knife Sharon hand him. When he opens the packages and unwraps the black silk, he nearly drops the entire thing.

“A pocket watch?”

“Y-yes.” The gold pocket watch gleams beneath the light, Jensen passes his thumb over the smooth face. He’d sent a runner to the estate requesting his most treasured item but he hadn’t expected his request to be granted. “My brother’s watch.”

49.

This night once again finds Jared sleepless. He’s not sure what to make of the day. He’d returned from Chad’s to find Jensen waiting beside a fully dressed table. It had been set only for two, braised boar and roasted potatoes flanked by a bottle of wine. The food smelled heavenly, Jared can’t remember the last time he’d had boar. They’d eaten in mostly silence, but it had been comfortable silence. At the end of supper Jensen had produced a wrapped box, and said Happy Birthday. It was only then that Jared remembered he was a year older.

Jared lays in bed, staring at the old pocket watch and trying to figure out what the gift means, if anything. He’d seen the inscription on the back ‘Joshua Julian Ackles’. For Jensen to give him this, it’s no small thing. It makes Jared think he does care, that his words are more than just a means to get back in his bed.

Jared slides a hand to his flat stomach, thinks of the child nestled within his womb. He still hasn't told Jensen, and he's not sure if he ever will. Delshire is his home, and if Jensen knew about the baby, he'd force him to return to the city. Jared won't be able to handle the isolation, the loneliness and constant disdain heaped upon him. Jared is struggling with his memories of the past, trying to reconcile the man Jensen has been since he arrived in Delshire with the one who had broken his heart in the city.

Jared pushes down his burgeoning feelings, strengthens his resolve. There can only be one reason for Jensen to be here, sex. Jensen will leave him, and if Jared gives him what he wants, he'll leave that much sooner, leaving Jared in peace with his baby.

50.

“And you can be the big bad hunter!”

Jensen looks down at the bossy little girl, who he now knows is named Melinda, amusement making him smile, “And you are?”

“I'll be the little wolf cub of course!” She throws her blue blanket over her head, grinning at him in excitement. “You do know the story, right?”

Jensen's found, among other things, that he can't stand to disappoint the children of the village, not when they have so little. So Jensen does as she requests, stalking her through the pretend woods just like the hunter does in the bedtime

stories they're all told as children. Pretty soon, the game of just two grows into a small cluster of children begging for piggy back rides.

Several of the older Weres are laughing, even the ones who have been staunchly cold to him since his arrival. Stifling a laugh, Jensen looks over to find Jared among them. Jensen makes a face as if to say 'what can you do' but instead of the grin he expects, Jared gives him a sad smile.

51.

"Don't let go!" Jensen scrambles, hands out in front of him to maintain his balance. He groans, "How is this meant to be amusing?"

"Trust me, Jensen, it's *very* amusing." Chad glides past him, inexplicably graceful on the strange instruments Jared has called 'ice skates.' "You make quite the picture."

"Laugh it up, bastard."

"You're doing fine." Jared calls out just before Jensen loses his balance and falls down to the cold ice.

The fall knocks the breath out of him and both Jared and Chad double over in laughter.

“You still can’t do it?” Melinda, a four year old, skates over to him, offers a hand benevolently. “You’re so old, though!”

Chad chuckles and pats her on the head before pulling her away. “Mindy is such a smart, lovely child.”

Ice sprays in front of Jensen’s face and Jared holds out his hand. Jensen takes it gratefully, pulling himself up before flailing.

Jared steadies him. “Try and relax.”

“I think this adventure is over.”

Jared ferries him off the lake. “It is for you.”

They go over to a fallen tree that the residents are utilizing as a bench. Jensen sits down heavily, “These things are bloody death traps.”

Jared grins, “Don’t be such a child, it takes practice.”

“At least I got to hold your hand.”

Predictably, Jared looks away, teeth sinking into his bottom lip in contemplation.

He gets lost in his thoughts lately.

Jensen watches the people skating over the thick, white ice. They seem to be having fun; child and adult alike are laughing and talking. A sport such as this would be unheard of in the city.

“Is it always like this?”

“It’s tradition before the winter solstice.” Jared supplies, “My father loved these months, when the final cold snap froze the waters and he could skate across, sometimes all the way to Davenport. He would put me in a sling on his back and just go.”

“You remember that?”

“I think so. My mother tells me a lot of stories.” Jared picks at lint on his sleeve, “You hear something so many times, and it starts to become real. S-sometimes I even dream and I get to live the story.”

“Do you have anything left of him?”

“Mama’s kept some of his things; his clothes, his books,” Jared points to the sharpened steel strapped to Jensen’s shoes, “Those skates.”

“I’m afraid I’ve not done him justice.”

Jared laughs and Jensen is mesmerized by the way the light reflects on his hair and the dimple in his cheek. “To be fair, you’re great at falling on your ass.”

“I’ll accept that as a compliment; no one fell as hard as I did, as well as I did.”

“You are the champion.”

The sky breaks above them sending thousands of snowflakes fluttering down. One catches on Jared’s dark lashes, melts against his cheek, and Jensen watches the bit of moisture travel down his cheek.

When he lifts a hand, Jared raises his brow.

“Don’t want you to catch a cold.” Jensen touches his cheek briefly before pulling the wool cap Jared is wearing lower, covering the pink tips of his ears. Unable to resist, his fingers skim the soft skin of Jared’s cheek. Jared shivers and Jensen tracks the movement, “There, you’re all good.”

52.

The snow has been coming down for hours, blanketing the land in thick white. The few Weres who venture out do so in their natural form, and Jensen can stop staring. In the city going about in such a state is outrageous.

When the fire begins to die, Jensen grabs his cloak before Jared can and trudges through the knee deep snow over to the shed to chop more wood. As he works, Jensen whistles, amazed at how second nature this has all become; he doesn't even get blister anymore, hands calloused.

Sharon is waiting with a hot blanket when Jensen comes back inside and Jensen thinks of his own mother briefly. In the past month Sharon has behaved more motherly than Donna ever did. Jared stacks the wood next to the fireplace before feeding the flames.

Because the storm shows no sign of slowing, they sit down to an early supper of beef stew and stone ground bread. After that, there's nothing else to do but sit near the fire. Sharon knits, Jared reads and Jensen spends his time pretending not to watch Jared.

Watching the snow accumulate to the small window, Jensen muses aloud, "I imagine it was a night like this when my parents came through."

His words are greeted by silence and too late Jensen realizes what he's said. He's about to apologize but Sharon interrupts him.

"It was." Sharon falters, needles clicking loudly against one another as she does and Jensen is sure he's made a grave misstep, but then she resumes knitting. "Have your parents ever told you about that day?"

"Many times," Jensen answers cautiously, gauging her reaction. When Sharon looks at him hopefully, Jensen continues, "They were coming back from the seaport, having sailed to France to see Joshua and I off for a holiday. They're

French; my grandparents are at least, not I. Obviously.”

Jared snickers, “Obviously.”

“Anyway, they were running behind, my mother kept postponing their departure because she’s always had a hard time leaving Joshua. That’s how they came to be traveling in the midst of winter. The way my father tells it, he thought the lake to be frozen through because they had seen some villagers crossing farther ahead.”

“The river narrows substantially at the bend.” Sharon says quietly, “It always freezes through first.”

Jensen nods, “Yes, well, you know the rest.”

“I’d like to hear how they told it.”

“My bed time stories weren’t about far away land, castles or princes, they were about Delshire and you father. My family owes Gerald Padalecki everything, I owe him everything. What he did that day...was phenomenal. I wish I could’ve met him and thanked him for his selflessness.” By the time Jensen’s finished speaking; Sharon’s eyes are glistening with unshed tears. “I know he was a great man,” He looks at Jared whose own eyes are teary, “He left an amazing wife and gifted me with his incredible son.”

Sharon crosses the room, takes his face in her hands and kisses both his cheeks.

“Thank you, Jensen.”

“I can only offer an apology for not behaving in a manner fitting to Gerald’s memory and promise, that from henceforth, I will do everything in my power to give Jared the mate he deserves.” Slowly, Jensen crosses the small room to kneel next to his mate. He takes Jared’s hand, trying to draw strength from the fact that he doesn’t pull away. “I’ve never properly explained, Jared, so I will do so, here and now, in front of your mother as a witness. When we were mated, I behaved like an ass. You were nothing but sweet and kind to me and I repaid that innocence with bitterness and deceit. I don’t have any excuse except for grief.”

“You mean Joshua.” Jared whispers.

“My brother’s death made me angry, at the world, at God, but mostly myself. I wanted to destroy everything good that came my way. I’d been dependent on alcohol and sex long before you came. People looked at me the way I wanted them to, like I was a mistake. But you... you didn’t and that infuriated me because I didn’t deserve someone to think I mattered.”

“Jensen.” Jared breathes and Jensen hopes it’s more than pity that evokes that stare.

“I haven’t had a single drop of liquor in two months, and I’m working on coming to terms with my past. If you would have me, I’d spend the rest of my days fulfilling your every desire.”

Jensen’s words are met with silence, Jared staring at him as if he’s grown two heads.

“Is this... what is this?”

“It’s just me.”

They both look at one another; neither seem to know what to do next.

Sharon bends down between them, whispers conspiratorially. “I believe this is the part where you embrace your mate.”

Jensen chuckles but all of his humor ceases when Jared leans forward quickly to kiss him. The kiss is off center, Jared’s lips are chapped and their noses knock together but it’s perfect. Jensen knows he’ll remember it for a lifetime. The kiss

53.

Beneath Jared’s calm exterior, his pulse is racing; heart pounding. Tonight he’s taking the final step. Jensen has been amazing the past couple of days, but Jared is still insecure. He has to know if this is reality.

“Will we be buried indoors?” Jensen is sitting on the edge of his bed, bent over a piece of wood with a pen knife. Chad has been teaching him the art of wood carving. “What kind of storm is...”

Jared flushes bright red when Jensen trails off upon seeing him. Usually, Jared wears a long sweater, robe and wool stockings to bed but tonight he's wearing only a nightshirt, thin material skimming his thighs and doing nothing to chase away the lingering chill in the air.

"W..." Jensen eyes travel down his body and Jared can feel his skin tingle, "Where's your mother?"

"She's gone to visit with the Murrays."

"In this weather?"

"It's only new to you." Jared holds Jensen's transfixed gaze, invitation clear in his eyes. "We're used to the snow."

"Is there a reason why Sharon's not here tonight?"

Instead of words, Jared uses actions and undoes the laces of his night shirt. The material parts and pools at his feet, leaving him completely naked to Jensen's gaze.

54.

Jensen must be dreaming, and if he is he prays he doesn't wake up.

From the moment Jensen saw Jared in the doorway looking like a debauched angel, tan skin gloriously on display, he'd been hard. This is a side of his mate he's never seen. Jared has never been this bold. During Seclusion, Jared had been so sweet and innocent, now he's an absolute siren, seducing him. It's new, exhilarating, and Jensen doesn't know how to react.

Jared walks over to stand in front of him and the piece of wood falls to the floor forgotten.

"Are you sure?" It physically pains him to ask, but Jensen doesn't want any regrets between them. "We don't need to do anything, Jared. I'm more than willing to wait."

"I'm not." Jared brushes his mouth over Jensen's in a soft but demanding kiss, tongue licking over the seam of his lips.

It feels like a dream, and he doesn't want to wake. Jensen is afraid to move, afraid to do anything to break this perfect spell. He keeps his hands at his side even though he can feel the heat coming from Jared's naked skin. With each moment that passes, Jared grows bolder, kiss going hungry and desperate. Jared tastes like he remembers, sweet and addicting, and God, Jensen just wants *more*.

"I need you." Jared moans against his lips, and his paralysis lifts. "Take me."

Jensen slides his hands down Jared's bare back to grope the firm globes of his ass. Jensen lifts Jared up, carries him over to the bed and deposits him atop the blankets gently. Eyes fixed on him, Jared lays back against the pillows, arms behind him.

The position draws Jensen's eyes to the elegant line of Jared's neck, the wave of his hair and smooth chest. Jared's beautiful, Jensen's always thought that. He loves the differences in their bodies, how Jared is lean where he bulks, soft and smooth where he is coarse hair and muscle.

"You're so gorgeous." Jensen murmurs, hand grazing down Jared's trembling stomach, past the soft hairs above his cock to his thighs. He's stopped trying to hold the words in; he wants to let Jared know how he feels.

"I wish you could see how you look, spread out for me."

Jared catches his hand and tugs him down. He can smell Jared's arousal mingling with his own and it's enough to make him rear back, tear off his clothes in a graceless frenzy that makes Jared laugh and kiss him breathless. All laughter stops when Jensen cant his hips forward and slide his naked cock against Jared's.

"Yes...yes." Jared lifts his hips to rub himself shamelessly against Jensen's hard shaft, grinding and making Jensen's crazy. "Make me yours again."

"I will, love, I will."

Their mouths crash back together, tongues tangling as they suck at each other in an animalistic kiss. Jensen pressed Jared down under him, hands sliding beneath his thighs to spread his legs. It's been way too long since Jensen had had his beautiful husband like this, open and eager. He wants to fuck Jared, drive into him deep until Jared can taste him. He wants to make love to Jared, kiss his neck and whisper words of affection into his skin while they become one.

Gasping for breath, Jared breaks the kiss, riding Jensen's thigh, pressing down on him and Jensen can feel how wet he. He kisses down Jared's neck, leaving bites and bruises in his wake before he captures a pink nipple in his mouth. Jared makes a strangled sound in the back of his throat and Jensen repeats the action several times before latching on to suckle. He lashes the tender nubs with his

tongue until Jared squirms and begs him to stop and then immediately begs he never stop.

"Jen...please."

It's clear with every movement of his hips what Jared wants, and all Jensen wants to do is please him. Jensen kisses down Jared's flat belly, tongue licking over Jared's shaft slowly as he lets the unique scent of his mate engulf him. Opening his mouth wide, Jensen draws Jared's thick cock into his mouth, relishing every whimper Jared gives when he sucks him deep into his throat.

"I want." Jared's fingers slide through Jensen's hair, tugging him back. "I want you inside of me."

"Fuck, yes." Jensen pulls back, takes his own cock in hand as he looks down at Jared's tightly furled hole. It's glistening with slick and Jensen growls at the welcoming heat when he slides the head of his cock against it in a slippery rhythm. He's shaking with the effort it takes not to slam into Jared, bury himself to the hilt and knot him all night.

Ignoring his urges, Jensen pushes in slow, easing into Jared gently, watching every flicker of emotion that passes on his gorgeous face. When he's fully seated inside of him, Jared moans, cat eyes snapping open and locking on his own. Once he begins to move, Jared's eyes squeeze shut and he yanks Jensen down for a hard kiss. They're both sweating, bodies sticking to each other as they move as one. It's as if they were never apart.

When Jared's breath hitches and his cock jerks, trapped between their bodies, Jensen rolls over onto his back, bringing Jared above him. He wants to see Jared's face when he comes. Without missing a beat, Jared slides down his cock, hips moving in maddening circles as he rides him. His hair is tangled around his shoulders, hiding half his face and Jensen thinks he's never looked sexier.

Jensen grips Jared's hips, forcing him to move faster, harder; take every single inch and more. Soon they're both racing towards orgasm and the moment Jensen's knot is encased inside of him, Jensen starts to jerk Jared off. It takes less than half a dozen strokes before Jared's tossing his head back and coming across his stomach.

Jared slumps down, forehead pressing against his shoulder. "Oh my God."

"Are you alright?"

Jared nods, breathless. "I'm amazing."

Chuckling, Jensen tightens his arms around him. "You are."

54.

"Are you nearly finished?"

"Was there something you needed Mama?"

"Just a talk."

“Of course,” Jared closes the book he’s been reading, careful of the pressed flower between the pages. “Is there something on your mind?”

Sharon gives him a knowing look, “I would ask the same of you.”

It’s been weeks since the night he’d asked his mother to give him and Jensen the cottage for the night and Jensen hasn’t returned to the city. In fact, they’ve continued to sleep together, sometimes just sleeping and other times more. Sharon has moved her bed into the outer room, but neither have commented on the change.

Truthfully, Jared’s confused, he’d expected things to change but if anything Jensen’s grown more attentive and open. He’s not sure what to make of it. Jared had been sure sex would bring things back to the way it was before, then, in the face of Jensen’s coldness Jared would be justified in keeping his baby a secret.

“I’m fine, Mama.” Jared lies.

She takes his hand in hers, face stern. “You’re barely eating.”

“I must be coming down with a cold.”

“Jared.”

“I would tell you if something was wrong, alright? So don’t worry.” Jared pulls

away gently. Eager for a distraction, Jared begins to chop carrots for dinner. “Do you want chicken or pork?”

Sighing, Sharon follows him. “Where’s Jensen?”

“The North dam collapsed last night, Chad came by earlier looking for volunteers to repair it; Jensen went.” Jared replies, “Chicken or pork, mama?”

“Pork will do.” Sharon drags a half filled sack of potatoes to the table, and begins peel for a mash, “Jensen is really settling in to our way of life.” Her tone is conversational but Jared is put on his guard.

“It would seem so.”

“How do you feel about that?”

Jared groans, “Mama.”

“What? I’m your mother, Jared. I’m only concerned about you. Three months ago you returned, beside yourself, swearing you hated Jensen and never wanted to see him again. Now you keep the same bed as the man!”

Blushing fiercely, Jared refuses to look at her. “He is my husband.”

“He is, that’s why I’m wondering why you haven’t told him about the child.”

The knife in Jared’s hand slips, slicing through his palm. Jared yelps, “Shit!”

“Are you alright?”

“It’s a small cut.” Jared hisses, trying to control his growing panic. “How did you know? A-about the baby?”

“How does Jensen not know? You’re showing.”

It’s true, Jared stomach is no longer flat, the planes expanding into a tiny curve but it’s not something that’s apparent. No one else has noticed anything, even Chad says--

“I’m your mother, Jared, I notice every change.”

“I don’t...” Nausea makes him faint, “Please don’t say anything to him.”

“Why haven’t you told him? I thought you two reconciled.”

“You didn’t see the way he was before, Mama, how he treated me.” Jared wipes his wet eyes miserably. “I c-can’t go back to that.”

“You don’t think he’s sincere? You think he hasn’t changed?”

“I don’t know.” The more time passes, the more confused Jared gets. “I just want to be sure.”

Sharon gathers him close, “Sweetheart, when you’re in love it’s normal to be insecure at times.”

“Even with Dad?”

“Even with your father.” She rubs his back, “If you love Jensen, trust that love, the rest will follow.”

55.

Jensen looks around at the group of people, laughing and dancing across the dirt packed floor of the newly erected barn. Even after all these weeks, there are still moments when everything is foreign and Jensen feels out of his depth, uncomfortable. Several Weres are drinking spiced cider, others manning cauldrons bubbling with large quantities of apple pulp and cinnamon sticks. When Scott hands the wooden spoon to Jensen, he’s left at loss.

“Hard cider for the adults.” Scott yells in his ear, winking. “Supplies to the right.”

There are several mason jars set on a table, filled with white powder. Jensen stares down into the pot, watching the brown liquid bubble until Sharon comes by and tsks, kicking dirt into the fire ring and bringing the heat down.

“You never let it boil if you’re making hard cider.” Sharon says this as if it’s common knowledge, several more women come with her. “Get the yeast.”

Another thing Jensen doesn’t know. Luckily, Jared saves him, grabbing one of the mason jars and handing it to her. After that misstep, the women shoo him away and take over. Scott, watching from across the room, shakes his head.

“I don’t fit in here.”

“You’re doing fine.”

“I don’t think others share your sentiment.” This is the first town gathering Jensen’s been invited to and he’s already earned about twenty blank stares and several snickers. The polite conversation of Delshire is nothing like what he’s been taught in school. They speak of various plants and minerals that Jensen doesn’t know, and he ends up looking daft.

“You’re doing fine.”

“Is this how...” It hits Jensen then, the magnitude of his wrongdoing. How he treated his omega--his mate and husband -- in the early days of their mating.

Jared had been as he is now, thrust into a foreign environment with different rules and customs; an outsider, and Jensen had done nothing to help him adjust.

Even now, Jared will explain things to him; facilitate conversation when Jensen hadn't even offered him the courtesy of an explanation. God, he's an asshole, an idiot. There's no way Jared will ever truly forgive him, and Jensen cannot even fault him for it.

Next to him, Jared's now laughing, hands clapping to the music as his foot taps and Jensen realizes this is the first time he's seen Jared so lighthearted; joyful. Jared laughs with his entire body, shoulder's shaking, dimples out on full force, mouth parted as his head is thrown back. Chad drags Jared out to the makeshift dance area, swinging him around and shouting over the music. Jared pretends to be persuaded but Jensen can see he's wanted to join in.

Jensen watches them dance, Jared would never be happy in the city; he belongs here. And yet, Jensen can't remain forever. He has responsibilities to his family and name; business to oversee.

"Are you feeling well?" Jared comes back flushed, sweat at his brow. "You look sick."

"I'm fine." Jensen stands to his feet, waving vaguely towards the door. "I'm feeling winded, going to retire early."

Jensen's sure he's imagined the disappointment that flickers over Jared's face.

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“I’ll be fine,” Jensen forces a smile, “Stay, enjoy yourself.”

56.

When Jared wakes, it’s to Jensen warm and heavy at his back, strong arms around Jared’s waist as he sleeps. Jared smiles at the unassuming intimacy, listens to Jensen’s light snores as his heart beats. Jared’s aware of Jensen’s hand, laying over his belly as it is, and not for the first time realizes that he’s going to have to tell Jensen he’s pregnant. With his stomach already taking on a slight swell, Jared thinks he’s nearing four months, meaning the child was conceived in the city.

Near dawn, Jensen wakes, lips fluttering over the base of Jared’s spine as he does. Jared doesn’t move, body loose and relaxed, he wants to stretch the moment just a bit longer. Jensen doesn’t rise immediately, he snuggles back against him, fingers playing at Jared’s hip.

“I love you,” Jensen murmurs against his skin and Jared is stunned, sure he’s misheard until Jensen says the words once more, arms tightening. “Always.”

With another kiss to his hair, Jensen leaves their bed. It’s then Jared realizes that Jensen thought he was still asleep. Keeping the ruse, Jared doesn’t make a sound while Jensen dresses and then closes the door on his way out.

The moment the door shuts, Jared turns on his back, and laughs gleefully up at the ceiling, uncontrollable happiness making him hug his pillow: Security is a wonderful thing!

57.

Unlike the happiness Jensen expected, all the blood drains from Jared's face when he walks in on Jensen packing his trunks. Jared doesn't say anything for a several minutes, just watches him with unreadable eyes.

"Leaving?"

"Yes." Jensen shuts the trunk firmly. "I believe it's time."

"Were you going to even give me time to say goodbye to my family?"

Jensen freezes as the words sink in, "You're not coming with me."

Hurt floods Jared's face, "What do you mean I'm not coming with you?"

"You hate the city, Jared."

"That was before."

“I’m not going to make you unhappy, not again.” Jensen’s ignores the twisting in his chest, refusing to change course. This is what Jared needs, so he’ll give it to him no matter how it breaks his heart. “I’ve realized a lot of things in my time here, Jared. I’ve wronged you in ways I can’t even begin to understand. You deserve better than me.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m going to release you of any obligation--”

“No!”

“Damn it, Jared, I’m doing this for you!”

“For me? Is that what you want me to believe?” Color high in his cheeks, Jared shoves him, knocking him back a few steps “Or maybe you’re doing it for you! M-missing Joanna and all your other bed warmers?”

“I haven’t been with anyone since,” Jensen sucks in a breath, grabbing Jared’s hand. “I mistakenly sought her company after we returned from Seclusion, you know that, but I couldn’t... ” The words he needs to say are hard to get out. when all he wants to do is pull Jared close, keep him forever. “Jared, even then, you’re all I think about. There’s no one else I even see, much less bed.”

Jared’s absolutely still, blue green eyes dark and luminous. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying I love you.”

“You love me..?” Jared tilts his head, eyes clouded with confusion. “You love me but you’re leaving me.”

“I followed you here, and I can see that was wrong now. You deserve happiness and I want that for you. I can’t stay here for always Jared, as much as I wish I could, I have responsibilities to my family name, duties I have long neglected for nearly a decade in favor of poor behavior and drink. I know you wouldn’t be happy in the city, And I...I love you enough to allow you to remain in Delshire.”

“You idiot, all I’ve ever wanted was a m-marriage to be proud of! I wanted to love my mate and be loved. I wanted an alpha to take care of me, and I’d do the same for him in return. *That’s* what I want, what I deserve.”

“I don’t know how to be *that* man.”

“You already are. Jensen, you came to my community, embraced our way of life, you worked the mines so we wouldn’t have to, you patched the roof, erected the barn... and you, you played with the little pups, let them ride on your back and didn’t complain when Hailey was sick all over you. That man...this side of you, that’s what I want.”

“I just don’t want to disappoint you.”

“You won’t.” Jared steps closer, tips of his boots hitting Jensen’s. “Just love me, be faithful, and that will be enough.”

Jensen smiles tremulously, “I can do that.”

“Well, there is one another thing.”

“*Anything.*”

“I want you to save some of that love for our pup.” Shyly, Jared draws Jensen’s hand away from his cheek to smooth it over his belly. “I’m carrying.”

“I’m going to be a father?”

“Yes, you’re the father.” Jared’s lips purse in mock affront, “What are you implying?”

“Nothing like that.” Jensen jokes. He feels like a proper King, as if he’s been given all the riches of the world. He’s going to be a father. “It’s incredible.”

“So then,” Jared bites his lip, looking up at Jensen through his bangs, “You’re happy?”

“Ecstatic!” Jensen sweeps Jared off his feet, feeling mildly ridiculous but far too happy to care. “I promise to make you happy.”

“You already have.”

Epilogue:

“It was a dark, wintry night, many, many nights ago--”

“Last night?” Julian interrupts, looking up at Jensen with big hazel eyes. “It was winter last night.”

“It was, Bunny.” Jensen smiles down at his three year old son, smoothing down his unruly blonde curls. He looks just like Jared, but he’s unfortunately inherited Jensen’s freckles. Julian doesn’t mind them however, and he loves proclaiming to anyone who wanders by that every freckle on his cheek is a kiss from an angel. “But winter happens every year.”

“Winter is when I go see Ma-ma.”

“Jules, are you stalling?”

His son smiles up angelically, “No, Daddy.”

“Good,” Jensen continues, “Because you’re going to sleep whether you like it or not, two stories or not.”

“After you tell me about Grandpa, tell the one where the prince Daddy marries Prince Papa.”

Jensen rolls his eyes at the mention of that tale, Jared fancies himself a comedian.

“I can tell that one better.”

Julian squeals when he sees Jared, bouncing up and down on the bed. “Papa! You came.”

Jensen grins, Julian has a flair for melodrama; he’s just seen Jared at supper less than two hours ago. “I thought you were laying down for a bit.”

“I’m feeling better.” Jared walks over to the bed, well more like waddles over, but Jensen will never let his mate know it. He’s seven months pregnant with their second child, and this pregnancy is rougher than the first. Jared’s been plagued with nausea , fatigue and dizzy spells. “Figured I could help Daddy with your bedtime story, Julian.”

“Yay!”

Jensen leans over Julian and pulls the bed covers back for Jared, “You can start.”

Jared slides into the bed on Julian’s right side, moving Julian’s blankie unto the nightstand and shoving two pillows behind his back. Once he’s settled, their son instantly turns over to rest his cheek on Jared’s swollen belly. It’s his favorite thing to do. Julian is very excited to become a big brother, and has already begun partitioning his toy soldiers for his new sibling. They’d been worried he would be jealous, but even at three Julian’s not selfish.

Snuggled between the both of them, Julian is happy, cheeks flushed and eyes far too alert for bedtime.

“Once upon a time,” Jared begins grandly, “ On a spring day, long, long--”

“Not that long ago--”

“Prince Papa received word that he was to be married to Prince Daddy, but when Prince Papa went to the castle he found, to his absolute horror, that Prince Daddy--”

“Was a toad!” Julian interrupts gleefully, this is no doubt his favorite part of the story. “And the toad was mean and ate flies and made Prince Papa crazy!”

“Absolutely mad!” Jared agrees, hiding a smile. “Prince Daddy didn’t have any manners, he was constantly rude and--”

“He *smelled!*” Julian adds, clapping his hands in delight.

“It would seem Prince Daddy gets more onerous with each new telling.”

“Don’t be cross, my love.” Jared pinches Jensen’s cheek, “Anyway, Prince Papa could see beneath the toad’s anger and mean words, he knew Prince Daddy only needed a friend, someone to speak with and share his thoughts. Prince Papa wanted to be that friend.”

“But why?” Julian asks, although he’s heard the story numerous times. “I don’t like frogs.”

Jared looks over at Jensen, smile soft and beautiful in a way that only comes with contentment. “Because Prince Papa had fallen in love with the toad from the moment his wedding veil was lifted. He’d seen a different side of the toad in the weeks that followed; a good side.”

“And they lived happily ever after.” Julian croons grandly before grabbing the edge of the sheet to pull over his face. He peaks up at them before whispering loudly, “I’m going to get a prince to lift my veil one day, right?”

“He won’t be a toad, and not any time soon.” As much as Jensen hopes that day doesn’t come for a thousand years, he knows it eventually will. He brushes a kiss to his son’s warm forehead. “But for now Daddy will be your Prince.”

Jared smiles, takes Jensen's hand to press a kiss to the center of his palm. "And mine."